SIGHT & SOUND

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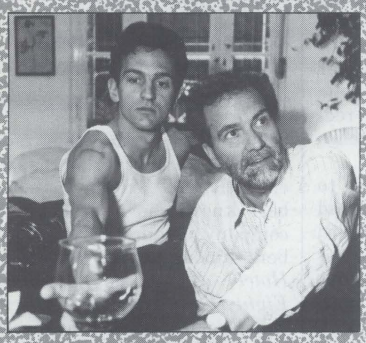

On the cover: 'Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound'.

Acting Editor: John Pym
Acting Associate Editor: Tom Milne
Design: Geoff Wiggins
Publications Manager: John Smoker

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THAMES SILENTS

Raymond Bernard's 'The Chess Player'

Thames Silents were inaugurated in 1980 with a relatively little-known film called *Napoléon*. To celebrate the tenth anniversary, David Gill and I were anxious to find another lost French silent—largely forgotten, preferably historical, and hopefully spectacular. Renée Lichtig at the Cinémathèque Française had been working so hard in recent years that our prime candidates, like *Casanova* or *Michel Strogoff*, had already been restored.

However, *Le Joueur d'échecs* (*The Chess Player*, 1927) seemed an ideal candidate: a magnificent adventure-fantasy set in the eighteenth century, with the Polish patriot hero's struggle for freedom, bizarrely disguised as an automaton chess-player, leading to a fateful encounter with Catherine the Great. I knew it from the much-abridged Pathescope 9.5mm version, which I first saw as a schoolboy in the 50s. Not only had the full version apparently been lost; its director, Raymond Bernard, had been totally forgotten. He had made two other epics during the silent era—*The Miracle of the Wolves* (1924) and *Tarakanova* (1929), as well as a five-hour version of *Les Misérables* in 1934.

Foreign archives are seldom anxious to make their holdings known, which makes life incredibly difficult for restorers (and often leads to wasteful duplication of effort). However, historian Lenny Borger, an expert on this period, tracked the film down to the archive in what was then East Berlin. He saw a beautiful print from the camera negative, apparently a legacy from the remnants of the Goebbels Archive (the film was confiscated by the Nazis because Bernard was a Jew). The first reel, though, was missing.

Whenever you embark on one of these projects, sheer luck often proves as important as the most careful planning. A Dutch collector, Jan Zaalberg, telephoned me to say he had acquired a vast amount of silent film, among which was a print of *The Chess Player*. I went over to examine it with my colleague Patrick Stanbury, and we found it in reasonable condition—all except reel one, which had been severely damaged by water. Watching the opening was like seeing a film at 7,000 fathoms: diverting but frustrating. Yet what other copy could we hope for?

In collaboration with the National Film Archive, we began to make plans for a restoration. Michelle Aubert, then deputy curator, translated the titles (still in French, except for reel one, which were in Dutch). When Wolfgang Klaue of the East German archive generously loaned us the negative, it was inadvertently delivered to Thames Television instead of the National Film Archive. Their despatch department had never heard of *Der Schachtspieler*, but looked it up, discovered that *The Chess Players* was distributed by Connoisseur, and duly reassigned it to them.

The Chess Player.

It was some time before we found out. By then, Bombay had been informed and, delighted that a spare German version had unexpectedly turned up, had sold it to Austrian television. Our intervention saved what might have been an embarrassing situation: a silent epic of Polish resistance masquerading as Satyajit Ray's drama of Lucknow.

We carried out a sneak preview during John Gillett's season of French silents at the NFT. The speed control of the NFT projectors must have been playing up, because the film seemed to last all night, causing anguish for the audience waiting impatiently outside to see *After Hours*, Scorsese's film about a man who misses the last subway train—something which, they realised, was shortly to happen to them.

We later calculated that the show had lasted forty minutes longer than the original performances in 1927. But while the speed could be corrected, what could we do about the water damage to the first reel? It was an insurmountable obstacle, and caused us to put the project on hold. But then, another stroke of luck: Fred Junck of the Cinémathèque Municipale in Luxembourg uncovered another original tinted print. This one with an undamaged first reel and, it turned out, brief stretches of additional material.

The restoration extended to the music as well. Henri Rabaud had worked closely with Bernard (he also composed the score for *The Miracle of the Wolves*), but unfortunately only the individual parts had survived, together with a piano conductor's score. With the co-operation of the music publishers Edition Eschig, we remade the conductor's full score. Carl Davis and his manager, Paul Wing, then began the arduous task of unravelling Rabaud's plan to match the music to the film. Rabaud, fortunately, had put extensive cues on his score (which also helped us to correct the order of some of the picture).

The political situation in Eastern Europe, with Poland struggling free of Russia once again, gave the film as much of a topical resonance as in the 1920s . . . Incidentally, *The Chess Player*, partly filmed at the same studio at the same time as *Napoléon*, contains a sequence shot and cut like the best of Gance: the only time I can recall in which wishful thinking and reality are intercut so powerfully that you are momentarily convinced by the fantasy. It is silent filmmaking at its finest. Pure cinema. Thames Silents!

KEVIN BROWNLOW

PS. Don't tell me you missed the December screenings at the Dominion—you'll have to make do with a showing on Channel 4.

SIMON PERRY

British Screen's new chief looks to Europe

Simon Perry, who this month succeeds Simon Relph as chief executive of British Screen, is best known as a producer; his company, Umbrella Films, numbers among its credits *Nanou*, *Hotel du Paradis*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *White Mischief*. But he's also worked as director, screenwriter, *Variety* staffer and head of the National Film Development Fund. Furthermore, he was an exhibitor in his own right: in 1985, he and Alastair Gregory rescued the Regal Cinema, Cromer, from closure and ran it for several years with evident relish.

Perry characterises the experience of owning a cinema as 'part romance, part business and part curiosity'—which might well sum up his attitude to cinema as a whole. Despite the endemic frustrations and disillusionments of film-making (especially in Britain), he remains an unashamed enthusiast for 'the unique power of film—to move, to influence, to excite, to change, more swiftly and profoundly than any verbal means of communication.'

It's these visceral qualities that he finds lacking in current British production: a dearth of 'ideas that can bring people into the cinema, that they can't get at home—ideas with a scope and exoticism, a sense of drama that works on the big screen.' The failure, he believes, is one of confidence, especially on the part of screenwriters. 'Confidence is what we desperately lack in this

country. People just aren't picking up their pens, the writing's not happening, because they don't believe you can get movies made. There's great talent here—but it's lying bedraggled, beaten into submission by years of neglect.'

And, of course, by years of fixation on the American market. Perry, who has developed close Anglo-French connections, strongly believes in the European option. 'It's not that I'm against the American cinema in any sense, because I'd be the first to acknowledge that American cinema is marvellous and powerful. But its power is precisely the problem—and I think it's vital to ask ourselves whether there isn't the possibility of an alternative. Good as it is, do we really want cinema axiomatically to mean American cinema? I would suggest no—and that we should explore the possibility of Europe as the home market, albeit with its immense variegations of culture.'

It's often those very differences that can lend vitality. Perry's horizons extend well beyond the EEC, and he cites Yugoslavia as 'a microcosm of what Europe could be, because it's a bunch of four or five nations that hate each other—like most of Europe. And out of that tension comes grand story-telling, good passionate film-making. The Yugoslav film-makers whom I know are all slightly mad, incredibly prolific, bursting with ideas. What's happening in Eastern Europe is a great opportunity both culturally and commercially, and if I can locate the projects, I see us working closely with all those countries, as well as with our EEC partners.

'Though in the context of Europe, there's something we'll all have to come to terms with, which is the extraordinary cultural power of the French. They export their culture very fiercely to all their ex-colonies, and they're trying hard to do it within Europe as well. There was an Anglo-French film festival at Dinard not long ago, and I was explaining the extent to which we in Britain have for so long been dominated by the power of the American cinema. And Alain Sussfeld, the head of the distribution chain UGC, responded, "*Soyons votre Amérique*"—let us be your America. Which got much laughter. But even so, what's fascinating in Europe is the ability of different languages and cultures to survive and exploit themselves. And we could be part of that.'

For Perry, as he readily admits, trying to 'break the insularity of Britain' has become something of an obsession. 'It's a job we must do over the next couple of years, because in many countries we do have the image of profound insularity. So quite apart from stimulating ideas within our own film-makers, we have to project to other European countries that we're open to ideas they might like to develop with us.

'And a European approach, provided it's combined with real work on bringing down budgets—because films do cost too much in Britain—should be a more profitable endeavour. What so often happens now is that once you bring in an American distributor upfront, you somehow find that all the world has to be sold off to pay for the film. So there's nowhere an investor who's not an end-user or a distributor, such as British Screen, can get their money back from.'

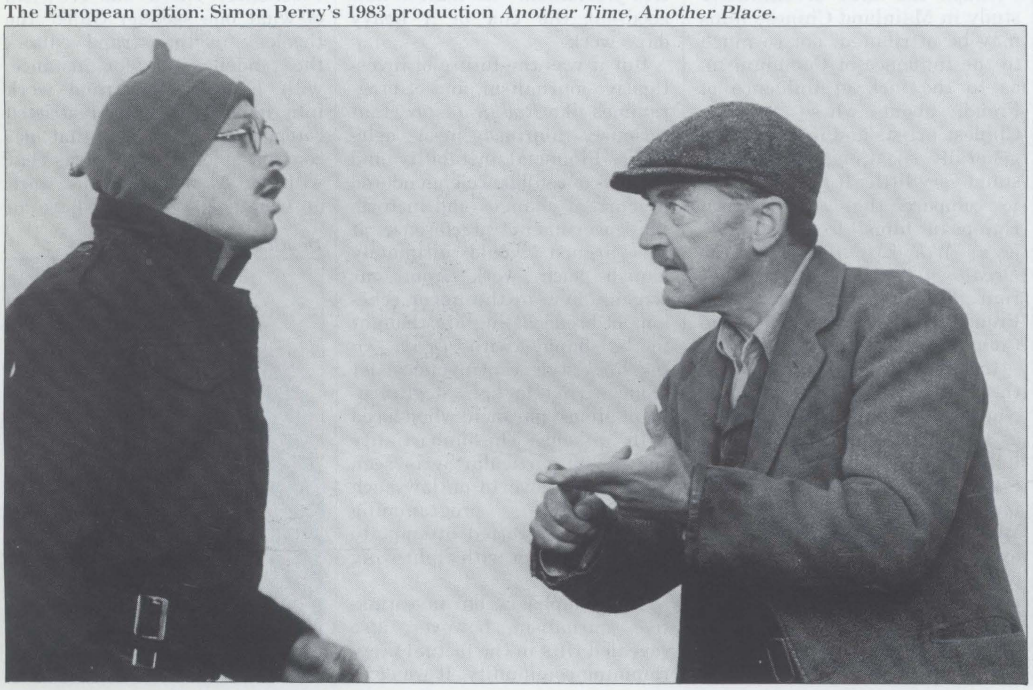
So will British Screen be unreceptive to Anglo-American projects? 'I won't be dogmatic, because there's bound to be certain exceptions, but I think it's going to be rare that we'll be involved in a film where the US rights have been pre-sold. It's been the pattern of all British financing for so long; I feel I'd simply be subscribing to an existing system which has done us no favours. I'd rather use this very scarce money I'm looking after to try to make things happen in a different way.'

All this, though, may soon become academic since—assuming a further Tory term in office—government support for British Screen is scheduled to cease in 1993. (Labour's plans, as formulated by their arts' spokesman Mark Fisher, look far more encouraging.) It's an eventuality for which Perry is grimly prepared—'unless we can convince them we're doing something of importance, not just in our own balance-sheets, but more widely. Films—as the French and the Australians well understand—have a great power to promote trade. Though you can never prove it, unfortunately.'

But financial success might equally entail problems. 'It's not hard to make a case for a tiny bit of support for an ailing and worthy industry. The real work will come if in three years British Screen is sitting on a pile of money, having cleaned up on a couple of movies, and they say, "Oh, well, you clearly don't need any more funding . . ." That could be a difficult case to argue. But I assure you I should argue it—ferociously.'

PHILIP KEMP

The European option: Simon Perry's 1983 production *Another Time, Another Place.*



CHINA

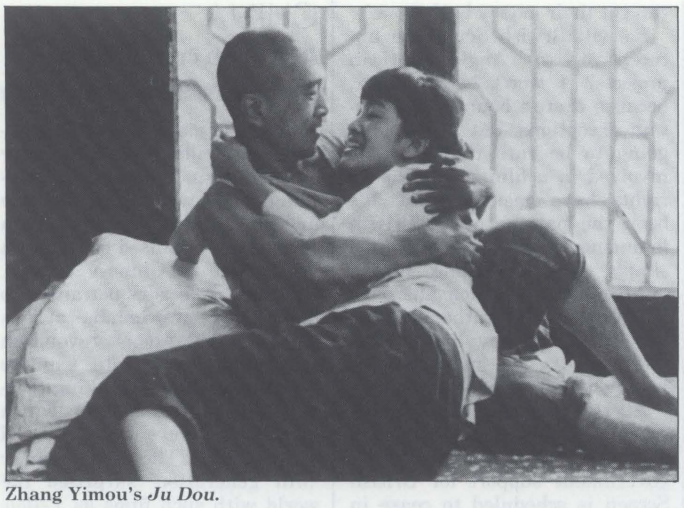
After the crackdown

Among the many tragic consequences of Beijing's 1989 military crackdown and subsequent hardline policies was the effect these had on Mainland directors at a time which promised to become a golden age of Chinese cinema. For several decades permitted to make only propaganda movies glorifying the Maoist revolution and the socialist state, Chinese directors were now making cinematically impressive films which cast a critical eye on society and its traditions. The 'new wave' or 'fifth generation' surprised the world with such films as *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984), *Horse Thief* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986), *The Old Well* (Wu Tianming, 1987) and *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987).

However, while the innovative 'fifth generation' were producing ever more innovative films, the Tiananmen incident of 4 June 1989 seemed to bring their creative work to a halt. Official policies once again began to demand that 'art serve proletarian politics', or at least that it not openly challenge this precept. Any demands for individual or artistic freedom were criticised by the Chinese Communist Party as manifestations of 'bourgeois liberalisation'. In the year following Beijing's crackdown, the number of films made by Mainland studios dropped by 25 per cent. Artistic, challenging films were out, and priority was given to the politically 'safe'. Consequently, no new films attracted international attention; the 'golden age' looked to be coming to an end.

But recently there have been indications that it may not so much be coming to an end as taking an unexpected detour. Top directors like Chen Kaige, Wu Tianming and Zhang Yimou have been seeking—and finding—finance abroad. Wu Tianming, presently living in Los Angeles, has received joint funding from backers in Taiwan and Hollywood to make a film based on a contemporary short story by a Chinese-American writer, Nie Hua-ling. About a woman from China who journeys to America in search of her father, the film will be made on location in Iowa and its dialogue will be in English. Although intended for distribution in the US, Taiwan *and* Mainland China, it is questionable whether the film will pass the Chinese government's strict board of censors.

Chen Kaige (who spends much of his time in New York) is also in the process of filming, with funds from backers in England. Based on a short story by a contemporary Chinese writer,



Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou*.

Shi Tie-sheng, his film will be distributed abroad and in Mainland China: it seems the script has already passed the Chinese censors, so the story is apparently not politically sensitive. Other film-makers are also getting around the censorship problem by making films based on 'politically non-offensive' literary works. A case in point is Tian Zhuangzhuang who, with financial support from Hong Kong, is currently making a film set in the Qing Dynasty, based on a classic short story about a eunuch (who may, advertently or inadvertently, represent the disempowered film-maker).

Ironically, the film which perhaps attracted the greatest international attention recently is the one which the Chinese government presently finds the most objectionable: at the 1990 Cannes Festival, Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* won the Luis Buñuel Award, and was even selected as the festival's closing-night film. *Ju Dou* (the name of the main character) is a family saga which touches on, among other issues, that of incest (from the traditional Chinese point of view, that is: the story focuses on a son who has a love affair with his father's new wife). The film remained unaffected by the Chinese censors for two reasons: the finance came solely from Japan, and the production contract between China and Japan was signed before the 1989 crackdown. The Chinese government has exercised its power as far as possible by banning *Ju Dou* from being shown in China; fortunately, however, distribution abroad is beyond its control.

Just how film-makers who work only on the Mainland, receiving only government funds, will deal with the Party's latest 'instruction' (to make movies eulogising the Party and its role in China's revolution, so that films may once again become 'propaganda events') remains to be seen. But one way that fifth-generation directors got around censors in the past was by making use of a highly developed cinematic language, with the images in certain scenes giving the accompanying dialogue an ironic ring. In *Yellow Earth*, the overpowering image of the land in every scene seems to dwarf the characters, whose words become mere echoes reverberating in the vast mountainous terrain. These images suggest the overwhelming power of China's rural tradition, dwarfing human attempts at 'modern' social progress.

Sometimes such visual sophistication escapes the eye of censors, whose education as film critics often leaves much to be desired. But while fifth-generation films often show a striking use of cinematic language, even the most innovative ones may put a Western audience—accustomed to feeling 'close' to characters on the screen—at a distance because they still tend to focus on comments and criticisms of society, rather than on psychological studies of individual characters. Perhaps the lack of character study in Mainland Chinese films may be attributed, not so much to the influence of Communism, as to the lack of influence of Freud, about whose theories Chinese artists and intellectuals, generally speaking, still understand very little. It is interesting to compare the way Eastern European films—from Makavejev's *W.R.—Mysteries of the Organism* to the 1989 Hungarian film *Documentator*—used Freudian theory to satirise the Communist system.

In any case, as it stands now, the future of Mainland Chinese cinema is as difficult to predict as the future of Mainland China itself. But attempts to restrict creative activity may now be too late to have much overall effect. When China opened its door just over a decade ago, it started a process of development and interaction with other countries that will not be easy to stop in our modern global village. Satellite TV made it impossible for China to prevent the neighbours from watching the Beijing massacre. And like TV, films also provide a kind of skeleton key, which may make it impossible for China to keep those neighbours out ever again.

ZHANG JIA-XUAN/PAT DUFFY

FACTUAL TV

The prospects for the 90s

If there's one thing media folk are good at it's talking—usually very loudly and often without saying very much. So it was a pleasant surprise when the sixth Birmingham Film and Television Festival's weekend conference, 'The Future of Factual Programming', turned out to be something of a quiet, thoughtful conversation. In the light of current government proposals—especially those concerning impartiality—there was certainly plenty to be thoughtful about.

For some, the prospects for factual programming conjured up a ghastly scenario in which documentaries and current affairs were squeezed from primetime schedules, and thus starved of funds and status. But not everyone was so pessimistic. Roger Bolton, Thames Television's controller of factual programmes, exploded the myth that such work gets low ratings and was therefore unwelcome in primetime. Others pointed to the desirability of other slots and, in particular, to the success of popular current affairs programmes, such as *Kilroy* and *The Time, The Place*, which flourish on daytime television. And how many of us, after all, honestly relish watching heavy investigative journalism—no matter how good—at the end of a heavy day's work.

But it was the future of investigative journalism, and of programmes like *Rough Justice*, that seriously alarmed most delegates. Financial instability and the loss of confidence engendered by current changes and increasing government interference, it was argued, would ultimately banish such work from our screens. Few in the upper echelons of broadcasting are thought to be happy with *Death on the Rock*-style controversies, let alone raring to fight a government almost paranoid when faced with dissent. The impartiality clause, in particular, was seen more as a move to outlaw such uncomfortable programming than as a concerted attempt to flood the system with right-wing points of view.

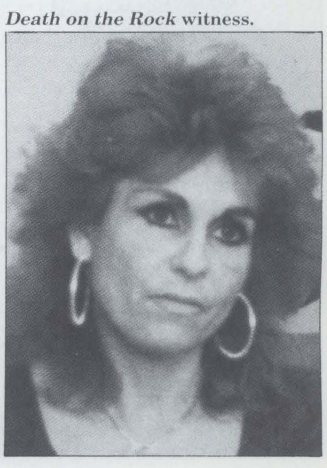
This emphasis on investigative journalism, however, also revealed rifts in the factual programming community. It was evident that for many participants some programmes were definitely more worthy than others. As one delegate pointed out, journalistic criteria seem to dominate current thinking in television, leaving very little room for more personal or quirky angles. Though his point was taken, the feeling remained throughout the weekend that it was the *Panoramas*, *First Tuesdays* and *Rough Justices* that really mattered.

And it was very noticeable, as Sky's feisty and impressive news editor Liz Howells observed, that women were largely absent from the conference panels until daytime and consumer programming came under the spotlight in 'Popular Current Affairs—Who Cares?'. What this debate revealed, in fact, was the underlying fear of many participants that precisely this kind of popular programme would become the norm.

The hierarchy of what—and who—is important was perhaps most surreally manifest in the session 'Making Money from Factual Programmes'. Despite gallant efforts, those from broadcasting institutions signally failed to grasp the financial and other realities faced by independents. And even the larger independent companies had trouble following the reasoning (or lack of it) that keeps some independents in business despite penury and overwork. For all the occasional note of whingeing and special pleading, the widespread dissatisfaction with the way broadcasters treat independents appeared largely justified.

More heartening was the willingness of some broadcasters, Roger Bolton in particular, to concede that not every programme in the field was of unbounded excellence. There was criticism of what one speaker called 'the theology of the strand editor', the tendency (as, for instance, with *Equinox*) to strand work into identifiable, but restricted categories. The ideas that get commissioned are the ideas that will fit. Alan Fountain's work at Channel 4 was cited as an

***Death on the Rock* witness.**



alternative way of operating, and it was generally agreed that programme-maker and audience alike would benefit from braver editors who followed hunches and took risks.

Risk-taking of a more deadly sort featured in the conference's most riveting event: an overview of reporting 'News from the Gulf'. Joining ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC were the indefatigable Liz Howells and CNN's David Feingold. The full implications of war reporting were chillingly enumerated, and not only in terms of the physical dangers faced by the reporters—all volunteers and all trained in the use of anti-chemical protective gear. Equally sobering were revelations of the extent to which the government and the military control and manipulate the news. It was encouraging, however, to discover that these news editors at least were clearly alive to these issues.

The weekend's major disappointment was that, for all the integrity, thoughtfulness and sincerity on display, nothing seemed capable of stirring these gifted men and women to action. There were, it's true, isolated calls for some kind of statement to be sent to Downing Street, but they were conveniently forgotten as participants argued less-exposed points. The one thing needed to ensure a thriving future for factual programming, suggested Colin Shaw of the Broadcasting Standards Council, was bottle—but there wasn't much of it about.

Still, as an event, Birmingham could hardly be faulted. Small (only 120-odd delegates), compact and intelligently thought out, it offered a welcome chance to explore beyond the financial aspects of programming that dominate so many similar gatherings. Indeed, its chief delight was simply the opportunity to *talk*. These days, conferences and festivals are frequently so stage-managed that participants are largely reduced to passive audiences, graciously allowed a few questions if there's time. Birmingham was a conversation conducted from all sides of the room. Altogether a successful party; perhaps next year someone will bring the bottle.

THERESA FITZGERALD

MULTIPLEXING

Basingstoke to Moscow

The multiplex revolution rolls on. The phenomenon is perceived as, at the least, a significant factor in the rise in admission figures over the past half-dozen years: from the all-time low of 54 million only a few years ago, to 96 million for 1990. Britain's first multiplex opened in 1985; the number now, under a variety of proprietors, stands at 28, with more to come. And the current multiplex share of total admissions is put at no less than 30 per cent.

The most recent addition to the list was opened in the autumn by Warner, its fourth such venture in the UK, in Basingstoke, Hampshire. At a rather appealingly traditional ceremony, complete with choir of local children, a bouquet was presented to the mayoress by a human facsimile of Bugs Bunny (creature of a vanished twice-weekly era of filmgoing), whose 50th birthday fell in 1990. The civic angle was appropriate, given that the 10-screen complex is located, along with a bowling-alley, ice rink and restaurant, at a leisure centre which is under municipal control; it was the local council which initiated moves for a cinema as part of the amenities.

Basingstoke seems a fitting site for such a venture: the population now numbers 140,000, against hardly more than a quarter of that 25 years ago, and crucially includes a higher than average proportion of adults under 40. The site, typically, is some distance from the town centre, which seems to presuppose use of private transport, but is well placed for road links; corporate thinking is that potential customers fall within a radius of 20 minutes' driving distance.

The Basingstoke cinema has a total audience capacity of 2,408, with individual auditoria seating from 420 to 180. Two of the company's earlier British enterprises run to 12 screens, with total seating of 4,000 at the complex in Bury. But the official view, as voiced by the vice-president in charge of planning and architecture, seems to be that rather lower numbers, probably between seven and ten screens, are the shape of the immediate future. This apparent qualification of the 'bigger is better' view, however, is presented in terms of population density at prospective sites (such as Aberdeen, where Warner has a project in development).

The horizons stretch much further, though, and like other multi-nationals in the field, Warner is now pushing the multiplex concept into Europe. Sites are in active development in Germany, with projects at discussion stage in Italy, Portugal and Spain. Warner is moreover collaborating with Soviet authorities engaged in multiplex projects in Moscow and Leningrad, due for completion in two years' time. In the USSR, falling admissions are not the name of the game. Ron Leslie, managing director of Warner Theatres, points out that annual attendance per head of populace stands at 14, compared with less than two in Britain. Coping with queues, he says pensively, may occasion some different design requirements.

Bugs in Basingstoke. Photograph: Nick Wall.

In Britain, queueing may not be a problem, but programming is sometimes held to be one. It is not uncommon to hear complaints that multiplex cinemas never look far beyond mainstream releases for their bill of fare. Mr Leslie mentions, with perhaps a hint of defeatism, that Warner would be glad to show 'art and foreign' films if there was a demonstrable demand for them. He points out that a week of European movies at the company's Newcastle multiplex was poorly attended. It might be objected that a week comprising a different film each day was not the ideal way of tapping a potential 'discriminating' audience. On the other hand, it may simply have to be accepted that, since specialist films never had more than a token look-in at the old Odeons and ABCs, there is no realistic basis for expecting any radical change of regime at their successors.

In Basingstoke itself, one wonders what the future might hold for the town's existing two-screen cinema, which came near to closure a couple of years ago. Martyn Frost, chairman of the council's leisure committee, puts it judiciously: 'That must be a commercial decision for them to take.' Mr Leslie, though speaking in more general terms, is less circumspect: 'Those babies are a dying breed.'

TIM PULLEINE

VENICE

'He took it like a gent...'

On Monday 10 September, Tom Stoppard was on the Lido, lunching with the press to talk about his film of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. On Saturday he was back in Venice to pick up a somewhat unforeseen Golden Lion. In between, he had been on duty with the film at both the Toronto and Boston festivals. Making the films has always been arduous; it's promoting them these days that is really gruelling.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was shot in wintry Yugoslavia, which was where the money and the opportunity finally came together. It is as accomplished and confident a first film as might be expected from its multi-talented director, notably well acted by Gary Oldman, Tim Roth and Richard Dreyfuss and effectively opening up the play, even if some of Stoppard's pit-a-pat dialogue can produce the effect of watching rather good ping pong without caring too much about the score. But one can't feel that this is quite the film which should be taking the main award at a major festival; and by all accounts it owed its Lion to one of those jury compromises which leave no one entirely satisfied.

The violence of Scorsese's *GoodFellas* scared off some of the jury; the women jurors, who it had been supposed might put their weight behind Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*, apparently backed instead the

Romeo, on first seeing Juliet . . .

Danish *Sirup*, a film from the festival's first week which by the end, as far as most critics were concerned, seemed already to have sunk without trace. Gore Vidal, the jury president, was said to have gained the day for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. ('He used his casting vote *and* his casting vote,' said Stoppard.)

At the press conference to announce awards which had already been most comprehensively leaked, there were several minutes of sustained applause for Jane Campion's jury prize. The Leone d'Oro announcement, when the spokesman eventually got it out, attracted no more than the mildest booing: the point had already been made. I suggested to Jane Campion that this must have been highly gratifying for her, if less so for Tom Stoppard. 'He took it like a gent,' she said.

But the definitive explanation of why Stoppard beat Campion came from a French journalist. In 1949, he pointed out, Olivier's *Hamlet* won over *La Terra Trema*; in 1954, when the competition included Fellini's *La Strada* and major films by Hitchcock and Mizoguchi, the prize went to Renato Castellani's now almost forgotten *Romeo and Juliet*. 'Shakespeare', he noted crossly, 'always wins at Venice.'

Aki Kaurismäki, who has also played games with *Hamlet*, won no prizes for *I Hired a Contract Killer*: his laconic style, using screen clichés as short cuts through plot mechanisms, is probably not to conventional jury taste. His new film was shot in London locations of unparalleled dereliction and decay—a choice imposed, he says, by his dislike of filming modern cars and crowds in bright clothes. Jean-Pierre Léaud, a clerk at Her Majesty's Waterworks, is summarily sacked after fifteen years in which he has seemingly made no money and no friends and acquired little English. After preposterously unsuccessful efforts to kill himself, he hires a professional to do the job properly, then meets the girl, changes his mind, but can't call off the assassin. The twist, in a film which is essentially about survival, is that the contract killer is himself a dying man.

The film is the characteristic Kaurismäki mix: short, sharp, absurd, funny and at moments genuinely affecting. Kaurismäki arrived at his press conference clutching a glass, walking like someone trying to hold to a straight line and claiming to be unable to communicate in any known language. A pose shattered when someone asked why his actors are directed to express themselves in such a flat, unemotional way. 'I have no emotions,' he said, 'so I can't film emotions.' And after this palpable lie added, almost in an undertone, 'Leave the emotions to Hollywood; let us take care of the film-making.'

There's a superb panoramic shot in his film of London at night, a forlorn perspective of river and street lamps. 'My art shot,' said Kaurismäki, 'to show I can do it.' Is it in order to admire the art shot? 'Yes, I like it too.' Why had he cast Serge Reggiani as the proprietor of Vic's French Hamburgers, with a shack eccentrically located in the middle of Hampstead cemetery? 'Because *Casque d'Or* used to be my favourite film.' A conversation with Aki Kaurismäki leaves one feeling very cheerful: one film-maker who has not been got at by the PR men with computer-programmed techniques for interviews.

Philip Kaufman's *Henry & June*, apart from being the sort of Hollywood film that looks after the emotions, was still notorious at Venice as a major studio picture under the threat of the dreaded American 'X'. Later, of course, a new censorship category was created, as it were, in its honour. Like so many films about Americans in Paris, and especially American writers in Paris, there is something rather breathless about it, as though Paris itself was almost too much to cope with. And when it comes to writers by the Seine, one might even prefer to be back with over-exposed Scott and Zelda and Ernest rather than keeping company with dour Henry Miller (Fred Ward) and affected, self-centred Anaïs Nin (Maria De Medeiros).

The writer in Maria Luisa Bemberg's *Yo, la peor de todas*, shown out of competition, is Juana Ines de la Cruz, a nun and poet in seventeenth-century Mexico, respected by the viceroy and his wife but up against the Church in full misogynistic frenzy after her protectors return to Spain. Handsomely shot, and well-made in upholstered, historical movie style, this is more of a film than several European competition entries sharing the familiar jumped-up television look. Rosa Verges' *Boom Boom*, for instance, is like a Spanish sitcom which has never been told when to stop. Sergio Rubini's *La Stazione* concerns a station master with rather the look of one of Olmi's young men and an unhappy rich girl waiting for the early morning train. Her impossible boyfriend arrives and starts smashing up the station, a hazard to which the young railwayman proves more than equal. Not bad, but basically one for the small screen.

Werner Herzog's *Echos aus einem düsteren Reich*, about the infamous self-styled Emperor Bokassa, seemed to strike most people as merely more television—talking heads and old news clips. The subject might seem almost too Herzogian, but he follows it down some intriguing byways: the stories of the Bokassa wives; the African tyrant's immense pride in his career as a humble soldier of France. His little son, in toy-soldier uniform, yawns through the coronation ceremony. Earlier, in a long-held shot, he gives no help at all while two attendants, one for each hand, fumblingly pull on his gloves. In an age before video, one wonders how such footage came to exist, and be preserved. Presumably Bokassa demanded a home-movie record of his great day, down to its least flattering aspects.

The film ends on a Herzog conceit. Michael Goldsmith, a victim of Bokassa's prisons and now investigating his story, is taken to a zoo where a gorilla performs its party trick of smoking a cigarette. Left gawping at it, Goldsmith tells Herzog that he doesn't think he can hold the shot much longer. Just a moment, says Herzog, and anyhow it's the movie's last shot. And the camera moves in on the puzzled, unhappy black face behind its bars. Spontaneous or rehearsed? Who knows? And if you're not in sympathy with the film, I suppose, who cares?

PENELOPE HOUSTON

Footnote on week one. The festival's undoubted oddity—a rival to Zeffirelli's unrestrained *Young Toscanini*, shown on the Lido a few years back to a chorus of catcalls—was Armando Acosta's *Romeo · Juliet*. This extraordinary version of Prokofiev's ballet, music by the LSO under André Previn, was performed almost entirely by cats. (The stars were on hand to meet the press.)

Shot in Venice, Verona, Ghent and New York, the film was clearly a labour of love and a measure of eccentricity. The famous romance, such as it is, might be the dream of an odd bag-lady (John Hurt) who, when not leading about a rat on a string, chugs through Venice in a boat named the 'Fellini' picking up a delightful assortment of stray cats.

The revenge killings are quite artfully adapted: a three-legged Siamese, for instance, is killed by a car on a pedestrian crossing, at which the canary in its jaws flutters to safety . . . Punctuating quotations from Robert Powell and Francesca Annis, as the lovers, Ben Kingsley and Vanessa Redgrave as mother and father Capulet. A delirious, hypnotic extravagance.

JOHN PYM

1990 OBITUARY

NOVEMBER 1989: S. Benjamin Fisz, producer (*Battle of Britain*); Edvin Laine, Finnish director of the 1956 *Unknown Soldier*; Harvey Hart, Canadian director of early promise.

DECEMBER 1989: Charles Ford, indefatigable author of *Histoire Encyclopédique du Cinéma*, *Histoire du Western*, etc; Carlo Rim, writer/director, mainly of comedies (*L'Armoire Volant*, *Les Truands*); Sammy Fain, composer/songwriter (*Anchors Aweigh*, *Calamity Jane*); John Payne, hero of Fox musicals in the 40s, assorted Westerns in the 50s; Lucien Aguettand, art director (*Poil de Carotte*, *Le Dernier Milliardaire*); Ben Barzman, scriptwriter in Hollywood (*The Boy with Green Hair*) and, as blacklistee, in Europe (*Celui Qui Doit Mourir*); Emile de Antonio, independent film-maker, interesting himself in politics (*Point of Order*) and art (*Painters Painting*); Silvana Mangano; Emile Georges de Meyst, Franco-Belgian director of the inter-war years; Lee Van Cleef, 'the man with the gunsight eyes'; Luciano Salce, director of lightweight entertainments; Georges Rouquier, exponent of non-fiction cinema, notably with *Farrebique*; Massimo Serato, heroic lead in the 40s; Jeff Alexander, MGM composer (*Westward the Women*, *The Wings of Eagles*); Roger Pigaut, actor in Guitry's *Napoléon*, director of children's film *Le Cerf-Volant du Bout du Monde*; Theodora Olembert, Anglo-French documentarist.

JANUARY: Lawrence Alloway, critic for *Movie*; Arthur Kennedy, player for whom the word 'reliable' might have been coined; Ian Charleson, co-star of *Chariots of Fire*; Terry-Thomas; Juliet Berto; Lyle Wheeler, art director (*GWTW*, *Wild River*); Gordon Jackson, ever-dependable presence in the 40s and 50s, later prominent on TV; Barbara Stanwyck; Madge Bellamy, silent star (*The Iron Horse*, *Lazybones*); Ava Gardner; Phil Austin, British animator, co-director of *Max Beeza*, *Sky Whales*.

FEBRUARY: Hal Ambro, Disney animator; Jane Novak, leading lady to W.S. Hart, T. Mix, H. Lloyd; Jimmy Van Heusen, Hollywood-based composer of standards for Crosby, Sinatra, et al; Jean Wallace, who smouldered most effectively in husband Cornel Wilde's films; Henry Brandon, Chief Scar in *The Searchers*; Erik Rhodes, caricature lounge lizard in *The Gay Divorcee*, *Top Hat*; Allen Rivkin, prolific screenwriter; Frank Ross, writer (*The More the Merrier*) and producer (*The Robe*); Michael Powell.

MARCH: Louis Page, cameraman (*Lumière d'Eté*, *Au-delà des Grilles*); Gary Merrill, unglamorous player who had a brief period of stardom c.1950; Capucine, willowy ex-model with a flair for comedy; Maurice Cloche, whose 1946 *M. Vincent* was once highly regarded; John Dexter, theatre director who occasionally strayed into films; Karl Brown, veteran all-rounder, author of classic memoir, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*.

APRIL: Aldo Fabrizi, the priest in *Rome, Open City*; Clair Huffaker, writer of Westerns (*Flaming Star*, *The Comancheros*); Ernest Steward, cameraman (the *Doctor* and *Carry On* series); Luis Trenker, Aryan he-man, actor/director in the 'mountain' genre; Greta Garbo; Frédéric Rossif, documentarist (*Mourir à Madrid*, *Révolution d'Octobre*); Robert D. Webb, second unit specialist, also director in his own right (*7 Cities of Gold*, *Love Me Tender*); Paulette Goddard; Dexter Gordon, saxophonist, star of *'Round Midnight*; Bella Spewack, comedy writer in partnership with husband Samuel (*My Favourite Wife*, *Kiss Me Kate*); Georges Lacombe, director, adept at grim melodramas (*Martin Roumagnac*, *La Nuit est mon Royaume*).

MAY: Tony Masters, production designer (*2001*, *Papillon*); Charles Farrell, who combined bravado and tenderness to unique effect for Borzage, Murnau; Roger Barlow, documentarist with the National Film Board of Canada; Louis Marcorelles, critic, one-time French correspondent of SIGHT AND SOUND; Sammy Davis Jr; Jim Henson; Bob Danvers-Walker, whose hearty clubman tones rang out over the soundtrack of Pathé newsreels; Jill Ireland, 50s starlet, then wife/co-star of Charles Bronson; Dimitri de Grunwald, producer.

JUNE: Jack Gilford, vaudeville comic turned character actor (*Save the Tiger*, *Cocoon*); Sir Rex Harrison; Theodore J. Lydecker, special-effects virtuoso; Sir James Carreras, supremo at Hammer Films; Hubert Rostaing, jazz clarinettist who scored some 30 films; Raymond Huntley, paradigm of officious authority; Cedric Belfrage, English journalist in Hollywood, deported by HUAC; Harold Buchman, versatile scriptwriter; Sydney Boehm, who specialised in writing crime thrillers (*Undercover Man*, *The Big Heat*); John Stoll, production designer (*Lawrence of Arabia*, *Shirley Valentine*).

JULY: Howard Duff, tough guy (*Brute Force*, *The Naked City*); Florence de Jong, flamboyant NFT pianist in the 70s; Lois Moran, silent star (*Stella Dallas*, *Reckless Lady*); Philip Leacock, director for Rank in the 50s and US TV thereafter; Margaret Lockwood; Sergei Paradjanov; Stanley Shapiro, comedy writer (*Pillow Talk*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*); Sacha Pitoëff, mournful member of the *Marienbad* menage; Georges Flamant, the pimp in *La Chienne*; Alan Clarke, director (*Scum*, *Rita, Sue & Bob Too*); Elizabeth Allen, MGM starlet in the 30s, British TV star in the 50s; Ed Emshwiller, experimental film-maker (*Relativity*, *Image, Flesh and Voice*); Jill Esmond, star of early talkies whose fame was soon eclipsed by that of her husband Laurence Olivier.

AUGUST: Charles Marquis Warren, writer/director, almost invariably of Westerns; Dorothy Mackaill, Hull-born Ziegfeld girl, Warners star in the early 30s; Pearl Bailey, jazz singer (*St Louis Blues*) and actress (*The Landlord*); Edmund H. North, scriptwriter (*Young Man with a Horn*, *Cowboy*).

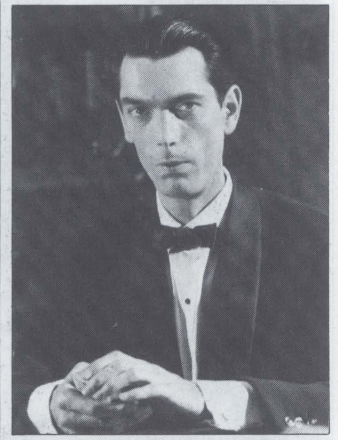
SEPTEMBER: Irene Dunne; Jack Hildyard, cameraman (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Modesty Blaise*); Frank Waldman, scriptwriter, frequently in collaboration with Blake Edwards; Athene Seyler, multi-chinned purveyor of upper-class eccentricity; Barry Davis, television director (*Oppenheimer*, the banned *Brimstone and Treacle*); Hermes Pan, choreographer; Alberto Moravia, much-filmed novelist (*Le Mépris*, *Il Conformista*); Scott Bartlett, experimental film-maker.

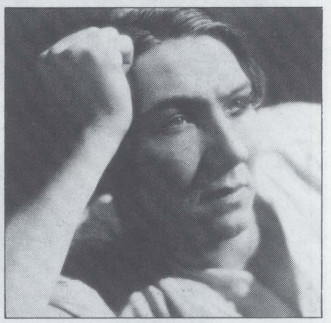
OCTOBER: Denis Mitchell, prestigious TV documentary producer; Jill Bennett, who was too offbeat to be a film star; Marjorie Bilbow, long-serving critic with *Screen International*; Grim Natwick, animator of *Betty Boop* series, Disney's *Snow White*; Irene Mayer Selznick, daughter of Louis B., wife of David O., Broadway mogul in her own right; Leonard Bernstein; Delphine Seyrig; Vankutre Shantaram, Indian director; Joel McCrea; Lester Cowan, producer (*My Little Chickadee*, *Story of GI Joe*); William Paley, pioneering tycoon of American broadcasting; Jacques Demy; Ugo Tognazzi, actor, comedian, occasional director.

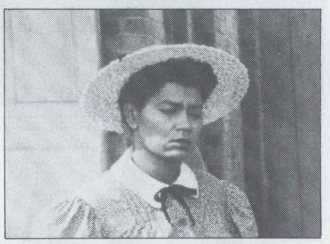
NOVEMBER: Mary Martin, Paramount contract artiste, Broadway favourite; Gianni Amico, director for cinema and TV (*Tropici*, *L'Inchiesta*); Eve Arden, wisecrack queen; Maurice Richlin, writer, co-creator of Inspector Clouseau; Pierre Braunberger, producer; Leonid Trauberg.

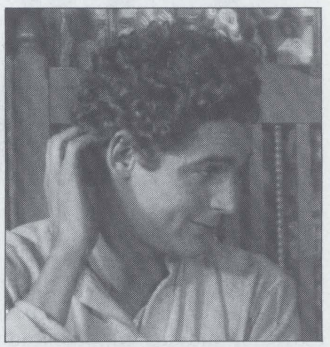
compiled by BOB BAKER

From top: Sacha Pitoëff, Georges Flamant, Pearl Bailey, Charles Farrell, Delphine Seyrig.









· STEVE VINEBERG ·

SWING SHIFT

a tale of Hollywood

There are plenty of tales of Hollywood injustices—of the good work of screenwriters destroyed by directors, of great scripts dumped at the whim of powerful stars, of movies nipped and carved by producers and studio heads after directors had given them their final shape. This particular story, sad and revealing, is about Jonathan Demme, Goldie Hawn and *Swing Shift*.

Demme began shooting *Swing Shift* in the first half of 1983. *Citizens Band* (also known as *Handle with Care*) and *Melvin and Howard* had established his distinctly flaky, loose-limbed style, but this new project was the biggest of his young career. It starred one of Hollywood's most bankable performers, Goldie Hawn—who also takes a strong hand in the production of her own movies—and featured Kurt Russell and Ed Harris. A big-budget period piece, *Swing Shift* would begin the day before Pearl Harbor, end just after V-J Day, and focus on the introduction of a women's work force during the war; the action would take place in and around the MacBride airplane plant in Los Angeles.

The large, promising cast Demme assembled included Christine Lahti, Fred Ward, Holly Hunter, Sudie Bond, Patty Maloney, Lisa Pelikan, and a few of his friends: Charles Napier (the bigamous trucker in *Citizens Band*), Susan Peretz (of *Melvin and Howard*), Stephen Tobolowsky (in two small roles), playwright Beth Henley (in a walk-on) and—as MacBride, who isn't glimpsed until late in the picture—Demme's mentor, Roger Corman. If you'd seen Demme's previous work, and you saw how graceful a touch he had with actors, the thought of what he could do with a sensational cast like this one was enough to make you salivate. And Warners, viewing the film as a prestige picture and a potential blockbuster, planned to put it out at Christmas. It finally opened in May, after a half-hearted, glossy publicity campaign that smacked of desperation. Demme renounced it, the press generally panned it and audiences failed to come out for it.

It takes a little digging to determine exactly how the *Swing Shift* that appeared in May 1984 (and can be widely seen, of course, on video) evolved; Demme, who pronounced it the worst experience of his career in interviews at the time, has long since stopped talking about it publicly. The film carries a screenwriting credit to Rob Morton, who doesn't exist; at least four writers contributed at one time or another. Nancy Dowd came up with the original script, and since the story is so similar to *Coming Home*, which she also worked on, it's easy to make the assumption—as I did when I reviewed the movie for *Film Quarterly* in 1984—

that she's mainly responsible for both.

Kay Walsh (Goldie Hawn), the heroine of *Swing Shift*, is a housewife who grows out of her dependency on her husband Jack (Ed Harris) when he goes off to war, and she gets a job in a factory and has an affair with another man, her co-worker Lucky Lockhart (Kurt Russell); in *Coming Home*, Sally, played by Jane Fonda, acquires a new set of values—feminist and anti-war—when her husband goes to Vietnam, and she signs up to do volunteer work in a vets' hospital and falls in love with one of the patients. However, Dowd's screenplay for *Swing Shift* was in fact heavily rewritten by Bo Goldman, and then Ron Nyswaner took over. The movie critic Michael Sragow reports that when he visited the set, researching an article on Demme for *American Film*, the shooting script bore Nyswaner's name, and Demme was using it exclusively. (Nyswaner, a gifted screenwriter, later furnished *Mrs Soffel*.)

Goldie Hawn and her producing partner Anthea Sylbert, interviewed by Ben Brantley for a profile of Hawn in the September 1989 *Vanity Fair*, claim the problems began when Demme delivered his first cut to Warners and the executives didn't like it. Neither did Hawn, who says she felt that 'the arc of [Kay's] character' wasn't clear, that 'Jonathan's focus went off her at . . . very crucial moments . . .' According to Sylbert, Demme's version made Hawn look like 'this blonde extra who'd been overpaid'; Hollywood gossip had it that Hawn's real beef was that Christine Lahti, as Kay's best friend Hazel, was stealing the picture. Jerry Bick was officially the film's producer, but Hawn had approval rights, and she insisted on reshoots, over Demme's objections. Scenes were rewritten (some by Robert Towne) and refilmed (it's not clear who stood behind the camera—only that Hawn was overall supervisor); a new cut was prepared.

If you listen to Hawn and Sylbert's version of the story, the release print of *Swing Shift* was the best job Hawn and her friends could cobble together under impossible circumstances. I've never met or spoken to Jonathan Demme, but anyone who's seen the pictures he's done since (*Stop Making Sense*, *Something Wild*, *Married to the Mob*) and the ones Hawn's been involved in (*Wildcats*, *Overboard*, *Bird on a Wire*) might be wary of accepting her point of view over his on artistic matters. As it happens, though, there's a smoking gun: a director's cut, dupes of which have been circulating for years. And the Demme version of *Swing Shift* is extraordinary—one of the best movies made by an American in the 80s. Taken together, the two cuts are the most powerful lesson I've ever had in how a first-rate director works.

The first thing you notice is the difference Demme's impeccable film sense makes. Stiff and static, the studio cut of *Swing Shift* seems embalmed in the creamy, sunlit haze of Tak Fujimoto's cinematography; the movie dawdles, and the characters (especially Kay) have no apparent forward movement. Demme's cut is the same length but seems to move much faster: his editing gives it a flying density.

You can spot the technical devices he relies on to achieve this effect (wipes in a montage showing the women getting accustomed to swing-shift life at the factory), and the way, in a workers' jamboree scene, he preserves the separate rhythm of each section, leading gracefully from Kay's reticence to join in the festivities to Hazel's reunion with her old boyfriend, Biscuits (Fred Ward). (Hawn's editors intercut them.) The period markers Hawn took out—a speech by the factory's first war widow, Jeanie Sherman (Holly Hunter), commemorating the anniversary of her husband's death; the moment when the women listen, teary-eyed, to eulogies for FDR—place the individual scenes in a personal and historical context. What remains (like the announcement of the battle at Guadalcanal) isn't sufficient; it doesn't seem part of some overall pattern.

Worse, the commercial print feels impersonal, with a slickness that reminds you of awful big-studio products of the 40s—only without their gleaming conviction. The cheery Big Band-ish score by Patrick Williams beats on relentlessly, like thick icing slathered over a poorly made cake. And when you see what's been left out—almost every trace of Demme's eccentrically democratic vision (that is, almost every sign of an artist's sensibility)—you can understand exactly why the picture feels the way it does.

Christine Lahti: enviable gutsiness.

Demme's version is full of glimpses of women and men caught off guard at work and play: MacBride employees playing guitar and singing on their break; a gangly supervisor (Stephen Tobolowsky) pursuing broad-beamed Edith (Susan Peretz) at the jamboree; a female cabbie yawning as she picks up an early-morning fare. There's nothing emphatic about this; it's all offhand. But it's precisely this casualness—like having the embarrassed young Marine who has to deliver the bad news to Jeanie, and winds up with her weeping in his arms, say his last line ('I've never done this before') off-camera instead of on—that makes Demme's cut so unslick and authentic-feeling about the lives of these wartime workers.

The actresses who play Kay and Hazel's co-workers have wonderfully expressive faces and bodies, but Demme's cut gives us specific details about them at the beginning so we can keep track of them through the picture. Waiting on line to apply for jobs, the women strike up a conversation. Annie (Sudie Bond) mentions she's used to farm work, while the diminutive Laverne (Patty Maloney) says the best job she ever had was playing a Munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*; later on we find out she came to MacBride from roller derby.

None of this finds its way into the Warners version. And since Demme *crafted* his, the omissions make for little peculiarities in rhythm and continuity. While the MacBride spokesman lectures the new workers, explaining that the jobs they've been given are ideally suited for them because 'you women are used to repetitive tasks,' Demme cuts to a close-up of Laverne looking back at him blankly—a shot that makes a point only if you know this woman's background, and how preposterous his statement must sound to her.

At first, you can't believe the people who put this cut together had any sort of constructive plan—they simply appear to be hacking away at Demme's. But most of the changes are deliberate, and, since Hawn supervised them, most concern Kay's character. The movie's title doesn't just identify the hours Kay and her friends work at MacBride (four to midnight). It also tells us what happens to her during the war: her values shift, swinging her into a more profound (and more adult) understanding of the world.

The Kay we meet in the opening scenes is sweet but a little drippy—a well-brought-up Iowa WASP who offers hot milk or tea and sandwiches in a crisis. She's married to a guy who's even straighter than she is. Jack finds the clothes Hazel wears to the dance hall where she works (as a hostess and sometime singer) 'cheap'; to him, she's a 'tramp'. But Kay is drawn to Hazel, who has a toughness, a gutsiness she envies—and turns out to have a capacity for. She's drawn to Hazel's sexual

forthrightness, which is a tacit encouragement to Kay to express her own sexual needs, during Jack's absence, with Lucky.

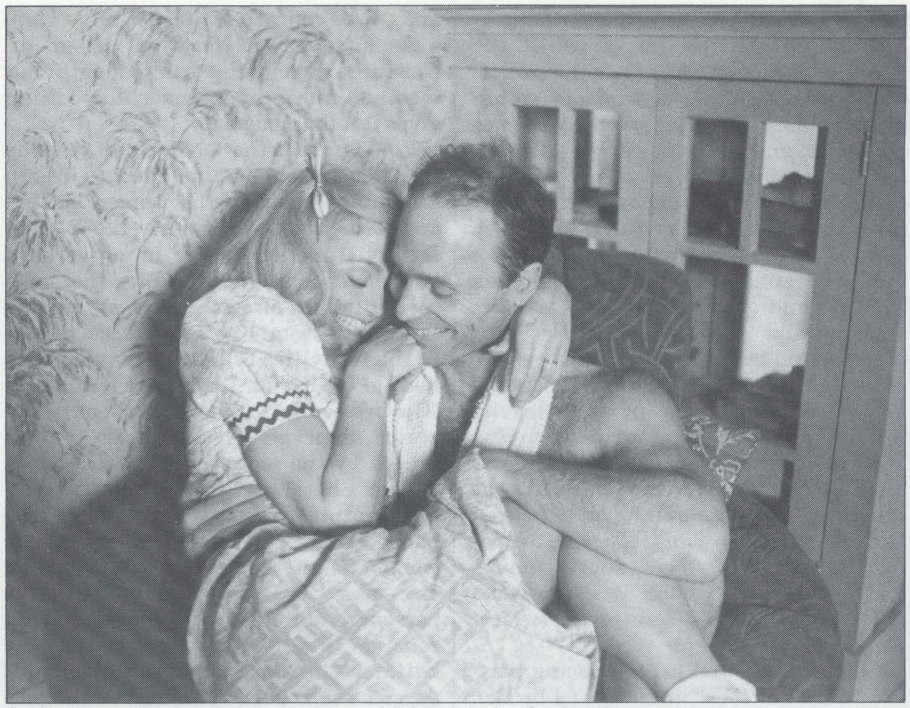
Kay is a difficult role, but beautifully worked out in Demme's version. She sometimes behaves badly, she's inclined to revert to her old prissiness when she feels threatened, but she really does grow past Jack—past the point they're at as a couple when he leaves in 1941. The film-makers show us everything that's inside Kay—how scared she is of going against the grain of old values the war and her new job are quickly rendering obsolete, how much it costs her every time she does, how much she gains by the risks she takes.

Hawn says her character got lost in Demme's cut, but the truth is that all three of the other main characters in the movie are important mainly because of their relationships with *her*—because of the ways in which those relationships reflect the shifts in Kay. The effect of the rewriting and restructuring is to blur what happens to her, removing the ironic perspective through which we're meant to get her vision of the world, and making it seem as if the movie shares that vision.

In Demme's cut, we see Kay's feelings for her husband most clearly the night before he leaves, when she touches his face tenderly as he sleeps. She dedicates herself to keeping Jack's presence alive by writing to him, cherishing mementos of him, talking about him constantly—which, of course, is also her protection against the stirrings Lucky arouses in her. Lucky asks her out shortly after they've met, but she protests gently that she's married; the next time we see him approach her, she staves him off: 'You've been asking me out every week for the last three months and I keep having to turn you down.' At the jamboree, a stranger (Dick Miller) asks her to dance; when she automatically brings up the subject of Jack, he gets turned off and fades away. Lonely and blue, she listens to Lucky play trumpet on the bandstand and boldly approaches him on the pier afterwards, complimenting his performance.

He drives her home on his motorcycle, takes her inside ('I think I just heard you ask me in,' he says, picking up on what she's too scared to say), and what follows is as candid and deeply felt a love scene as you'll find in any movie of the last decade. When Lucky begins to make love to her, she cries, frightened of her confusion about what she feels and what she thinks is right. She wakes up in the middle of the night to find him lying nude beside her, his arm across her chest; automatically, she pulls the blanket across him, as if someone were peeking in. It's a delicately funny gesture. The next night, they go out to a restaurant, and when she spots a neighbour across the room she runs into the street. He follows, but she begs him to leave her alone. 'I'm married,' she pleads. 'Don't you understand? Don't you get it?'

Their relationship begins in earnest under the effect of exposed emotions after the funeral of Jeanie's husband. Kay still has trouble reconciling her separate feelings for two men; she's worried that her fellow workers know about her and Lucky and think she's a tramp. But her self-sufficiency at the plant (she was promoted after saving another woman's life) and the easy carry-over of her work situation, with Lucky and Hazel, to the leisure time the three of them spend together, break down her resistance. Then one night in 1944, Jack shows up on leave.



Goldie Hawn, the devoted Navy wife, and Ed Harris, her husband.

In the movie's best scene, they walk on the beach, and she hears in every word he says an attempt to affirm a state of mind she no longer feels part of. She chafes when he derides Hazel, when he says his wife shouldn't have to work, when he talks about his plans for their future; she keeps contradicting him. 'Somebody's been putting funny ideas in your head,' he tells her, bewildered. 'I can't even talk to you any more.' And she replies, 'Do you really think everything's going to be great? . . . You've been gone for three years.' Finally she turns to him, her back to the tide, and confesses she's been seeing someone else.

Here's how the story is told in Hawn's version. We don't see Kay in bed with Jack, so her strong sexual need for him is not as firmly established. When Lucky approaches her at work, she says, 'You've been asking me out every week for the last *five* months' (you can actually see Hawn mouth 'three' while her post-dubbed voice says 'five')—presumably so we'll applaud her lengthier period of celibacy. Kay's freak-out at the restaurant occurs *before* she sleeps with Lucky, so it looks like an outburst of terrified chastity rather than post-coital terror.

In the new order of scenes, Kay's approach to Lucky on the pier appears more innocent; maybe she's trying to make up for her outburst outside the restaurant. When he drives her home, he *has* to come inside, because it's begun to rain and he's getting soaked. The scene that follows is a dopey retread from dozens of screwball comedies: his clothes drying, he putters around in one of her dressing-gowns while he serves her one of his special omelettes. They end up in bed, but next morning they have a silly, unconvincing quarrel; she kicks him out; he comes back. Hawn strives hard to reduce the relationship between Lucky and Kay to something superficial and farcical.

Goldie Hawn and Ed Harris: the walk on the beach.

Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell: alarmed by love.

We're supposed to think she's making a mistake, but it's all right, because she'll go back to Jack in the end.

Hawn's version omits some of the footage of Kay and Lucky and Hazel together, and includes an entirely new sequence, a confrontation between Kay and Jack that turns him into the victim of her carelessness. (Poor Ed Harris is strung up in this scene—he tries hard, but there's nothing he can do to make it work.) Jack figures out Kay's been having an affair with Lucky (though there isn't a hint of recognition in his face when he surprises the three of them dancing and swigging beer over at Hazel's), and Hawn makes a sad little face as she tells him, 'I was wrong. I'm sorry.' When he leaves early the next morning, we hear Kay's voice reading the note Jack left her, full of clichés about how the war's taken its toll on both of them.

It's clear what Hawn's up to. She wants Kay to stay 'nice,' committed to the values Demme and his writers have her reject for a more complex, challenging way of interacting with the world. Carly Simon sings over the front and end credits: 'Someone waits for you/Who hopes you will come through . . .' That's the ideal Hawn wants Kay to embrace.

I'm not trying to psychoanalyse Goldie Hawn; I have no idea how she really feels about fidelity and sexuality. But you have only to look at the movies she's appeared in over the past decade and a half (after *The Sugarland Express* and *Shampoo*—the only previous ones where she plays genuine, three-dimensional characters) to see how she wants her public to perceive her, and how wary she is of veering from the huggable image she knows they adore.

Demme asked her to play a woman who sleeps with two men and likes it, a woman who isn't always glamorous (certainly not in the scene outside the restaurant with Lucky, or the one where she cries when he touches her breast, or the one where she faces Jack and tells him she's been cheating on him), but is always real. And she did it. But then she got scared and threw the performance away, reverting to something she must have thought would keep her fans happy. In the attempt, Hawn managed to turn her character into nonsense—you keep wondering why Kay can't seem to make up her mind about anything. The irony is that Hawn didn't just slash Demme's canvases, but her own as well. Her performance in the unreleased version of *Swing Shift* is easily the finest work of her career.

Hawn has heartbreaking scenes in Demme's cut that remind you how gifted an actress she really is—especially the ones with Ed Harris during Jack's disastrous leave, where you see Kay's misery at having to make him so unhappy and her sad understanding that she can't continue to lie to him. And even when the scenes Demme shot are lifted whole into the version Hawn approved, they don't mean the same thing; you lose the significance, the weight of some of her best moments. We all know that the director has a perspective the performer usually can't have, and that a good director can shape a piece of acting; that's why terrific actors are so often crucified by bad directors. But I've never seen so glaring an example of how the building of a character—that is, the overall editing of her scenes—can completely alter the way an actor comes across.

When Kay protests to Lucky (outside the restaurant) that he has to stay away from her because she's married, you only grasp the complexity of the confusion Hawn is conveying if the scene comes *after* Kay has slept with him. Near the end, Lucky, hurt and angry at Jack's reappearance, has a one-night stand with Hazel, and the two women make it up. But that night they go together to hear Lucky play at a local club, and Kay gets smashed and turns acerbic. The result is a screaming fight between the two women on the street, which ends with a drunken Kay, flat on the sidewalk, yelling after Hazel, 'I was in love!'

A friend who watched the director's cut of *Swing Shift* with me marvelled at the way Hawn played the fight scene, which had been so unmemorable in the release print; he could hardly believe it when I told him they were exactly the same. The difference is that in Demme's cut, Lucky performs a second number—dedicated to 'anyone who's ever been in love, ever been hurt by love, and is still trying to figure it out'—and Kay, looking over at Hazel, sees an intense longing in her eyes that seems to suggest more than a one-night stand. (She's misreading—understandably, in the circumstances.) Hawn is fantastic here; she looks dazzled by the pain of having lost, she thinks, her lover and her best friend at a single blow. *That's* what her reading of 'I was in love!' plays off; it changes the whole meaning of that line.

The release print does minimise Hazel's influence on Kay. My guess, though, is that it's less a case of jealousy over Christine Lahti's treatment than another indication of Hawn's doubt over the way her fans might react to Kay. The Warners version contains cutie-pie just-us-girls-together touches (like a shot of Kay and Hazel clowning in front of the mirror with cream on their faces), but no mention of the fact that Hazel coaxed Kay into buying a Victrola. After their fight, when Hazel, on her way home, pauses for a rueful

moment in front of Kay's house where music drifts from the parlour, we hear a ballad. Demme chooses the Andrews Sisters' 'Bei Mir Bist du Schon,' the song Hazel was blasting from *her* record-player in the opening scene, when Jack yelled at her to turn it down.

The song is meant to remind us that Kay has changed irrevocably, largely through her friendship with Hazel, and to imply that the most important relationship in her life isn't the one she returns to at the end with Jack (as Hawn and 'Someone Waits for You' want us to believe), but the one with Hazel. On the whole, Hawn's version of the movie doesn't undercut Lahti's performance; ironically, since we can't finally make much sense of Kay, it's Lahti's Hazel who moves into the vacuum Hawn has left at the centre of the picture.

One change, however, does damage Lahti—from a misguided effort to soften Lucky (played by Hawn's real-life live-in companion, Kurt Russell). A brief scene is omitted in which Hazel, seeing Jack smoking on the porch of his apartment and Kay moving around inside, takes it for granted that their domestic situation is back to normal. (She can't know what transpired on the beach.) Then, out of the loneliness she's felt since she broke up with Biscuits, she decides to accept Lucky's invitation to hear him play trumpet that night. They wind up in bed together (Hawn cuts right to the morning after), as they both knew they would. The way Demme and his writers have it, though, it's really *Lucky* who's acting impulsively, out of anger: they're careful not to include a scene where he considers *his* actions.

Kurt Russell suffers more than Lahti from the changes Hawn supervised. His role is better defined in Demme's version, and he gets to play more low notes. That's especially true in his farewell scene, where, having taken Kay home after her drunken explosion at Hazel, he waits for her to wake up and then says he's leaving. We know he's going to tour with a band; he's already told her (in a scene left out of the Warners version) that she's the only reason he's still working at MacBride's. (When she gives him a new mouthpiece for his horn as a birthday remembrance, the gift means more when we know what he's giving up to stay with her. Of course, if Hawn doesn't want Kay's relationship with Lucky to have as much weight as her marriage to Jack, she wouldn't want us to see her offering in that light.)

The way Demme has it, Lucky sits miserably in the corner of the room, drinking from a coffee cup with Jack's name on it (it's clear from this detail that he realises he can't compete with Jack), and the camera pans slowly up Kay's legs—from Lucky's point of view, so we can see Lucky's appreciation of what he's giving up. In Demme's version, sex has an emotional kick, the way it does in life; he doesn't deny what it signifies to these characters, the way Hawn's prudish version does. Before

'I think I just heard you ask me in.'

Lucky walks out, he takes a long look at himself in her bedroom mirror, as if he were both remembering his role in this room—in her life—and understanding it in a way he never has before. It's a bitter departure. We know—as Kay does, reaching uselessly after him—that he's wrong about how little he's meant to her, but that's something he may never believe.

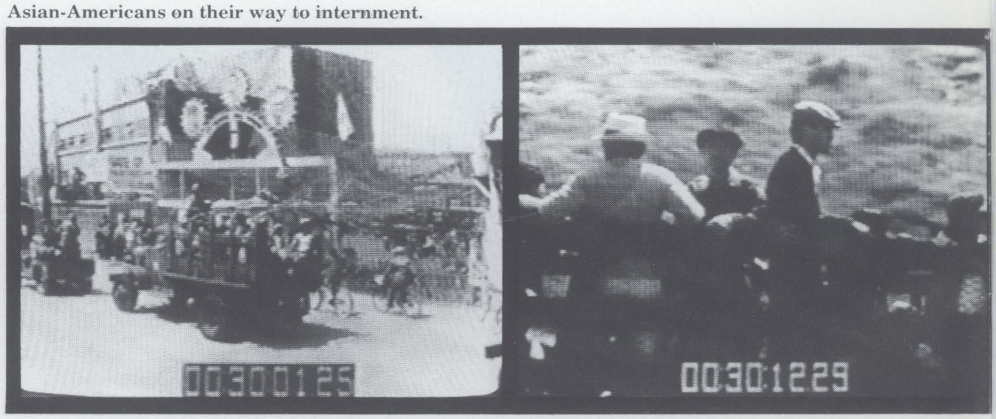
Russell is magnificent here; much as I've loved watching him in *Used Cars*, *Silkwood* and *Tequila Sunrise*, I've never seen him pull off anything as affecting as this scene. But you have to be prepared to see a character you've been drawn to walk away harshly. Hawn evidently didn't want to. In the studio cut, the scene begins when Kay wakes up; you can hardly see the letters of Jack's name printed on the cup, and the look in the mirror is truncated. When Lucky tells Kay he's going away, he asks her to come with him and she turns him down.

A couple of minutes before the end of the picture, Hawn inserts a brief sequence of Lucky riding through the countryside at night in a bus full of musicians, reading a letter from Kay (voice-over by Hawn) that—like the one we heard earlier, from Jack—is littered with optimistic clichés. 'I'm hoping for the best,' she writes about Jack's return from the war, and (by way of apology to Lucky), 'Things got muddled in the end, but thanks.' You'd swear at moments like this that Kay—the prim Kay Goldie Hawn doesn't want us to think the character left behind—wrote the script.

On some level, Hawn seems to have understood *Swing Shift* as a proto-feminist look at women on the work force in wartime. But feminism to her means *Private Benjamin*: women proving they can be as good as men and twice as cute. (It doesn't mean, for example, sexual independence.) The studio cut omits the references to Laverne's show-business career and Annie's handling of farm machinery, but it makes a big deal about how working at the factory turns Kay into a stronger person because she makes a bigger salary than Jack and learns her way around equipment.

One montage Warners added includes a shot of Hawn in her kitchen fixing a coffee percolator; in another scene, a PA announcement advises the women to cut their hair or wear a hairnet (this is what they superimposed over Annie's farm-equipment line). Presumably

Asian-Americans on their way to internment.



Swing Shift: Christine Lahti, Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell.

that's so Kay's decision to cut her long blonde tresses—presented in Demme's version as one more indication that she's trying on something new—will come across as determination to turn herself into the perfect little worker. (Since she has to wear a hairnet anyway, like all the other women, the change doesn't make sense.)

Of course, you don't buy this airbrushed portrait of Kay as a role model for women of the 40s, which is presented in a fatuous, sitcom manner, reducing Jack to a male chauvinist so the movie can score easy points against him. (Hawn's cut doesn't *like* Jack very much: he just fills a role—the someone who waits for Kay.) When Jack arrives on leave, he fails to understand the significance of her 'leadman' shirt and complains that the factory equipment she's brought home crowds his bedroom closet. Just what, exactly, is Kay doing with airplane parts in her closet?

We can't believe in Kay's growth when Hawn has undercut all evidence of it in her relationship with her husband. The homecoming sequence in the studio print features an extra scene where Kay opens the door to their apartment with her own key, rather than letting Jack take the lead. But the second change is far more revealing: as soon as they get inside, Kay tells Jack she's planning a home-cooked dinner.

This unconvincing fake feminism substitutes for a genuine political subtext that is perhaps the most striking omission in the studio cut. Holly Hunter's Jeanie plays a far more important role in Demme's version. When her husband is killed, she becomes a convenient emblem for the war effort: her 'cute, tear-stained face' (as one of MacBride's men puts it) makes the cover of *Life*, and a year later, dedicating a runway to his memory, she gets to introduce a Marine who delivers a patriotic speech to the assembled workers (and whom she marries at the end of the picture). If it isn't clear enough how the filmmakers feel about this kind of sentimental patriotic manipulation, Demme makes it clearer by cutting away from the speech—to Kay and Lucky, who are using the cover of this special event to talk clandestinely in the storeroom.

The Jeanie subplot works in tandem with the scene where the MacBride employees listen to the reports from Guadalcanal and then are coaxed to work harder for the boys at the front, as well as the key sequence where, as soon as the war is over, the women are laid off. With this subplot firmly in place, we can see that the movie is critical of the way the women were used and then discarded by the government and the factories. Without it, the lay-off scenes don't have much resonance and the Guadalcanal scene reads as inspirational—exactly the *opposite* of what Demme intended.

Warners also cut a scene with Beth Henley as a Salvation Army woman handing out Bibles to the departing soldiers (which implies a connection between the two 'armies'—religion shoring up the war effort), and another where, outside the factory, Asian-Americans are carted off to internment camps while men on the street jeer, 'Japs, go home where you came from!' And what substitutes for these missing suggestions of the movie's political point of view? In a new scene between Kay and Jack the morning after Pearl Harbor—replacing their scene in bed together—he explains solemnly to her why he has to go to war: 'They started it. We gotta finish it.'

I don't think it's fair to lay the political emasculation of *Swing Shift* entirely at Goldie Hawn's door. Hollywood has always been terrified of attacking sacred cows; you could hardly imagine Warners enthusing over Demme's take on World War II. At the end of the studio's cut, Biscuits, reunited with Hazel, toasts each of the assembled couples and 'No more war—one hell of a future.' If there's any irony here, I missed it. I missed the irony in the women's toast, too: 'We showed 'em.'

Demme's version, which is understated and moving, pays homage to the finale of William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). It picks up Wyler's tone of complex, tempered optimism in the vets' discussion of the new real estate on the market, the now ex-factory workers' philosophical attitude to the way their lives have turned around, and the fact that it's Jeanie, MacBride's cover-girl war widow, whose wedding they're attending.

'We showed 'em' is echoed in the scene where Hazel and Kay reconcile: it means something different here—it's a measure of personal growth. And instead of ending with a freeze frame of the two women hugging, Demme takes them down to the beach, and leaves them (in long shot) drinking beer and giggling and kicking up their heels. It's the final affirmation that Kay has moved a lot closer to Hazel's end of the spectrum than Jack's. She still loves him, but if he wants the marriage to last, he's going to have to work to catch up to her.

The *Swing Shift* story is a Hollywood tragedy. It echoes what RKO did to Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*. The difference though is that the *Ambersons*, in release and on video, botched or not, is still a masterpiece. No viewing of the release print of *Swing Shift*, however, will tell you what Demme and his writers were after—what, in fact, they achieved before their work was so emphatically undone. ■

X MARKS THE SPOT

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover.

If 1989 is remembered as the year when a large portion of the world pushed back barriers that had previously seemed immovable, 1990, in America at least, may go down as the year we allowed the borders of one of our taken-for-granted freedoms—freedom of speech—to come creeping inward. Since Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, the American Right has sought to remake society in its own image.

Congress required artists receiving federal grants to pledge that their work would not be obscene or homoerotic (heterosexual eroticism was not mentioned). A museum curator, a rap group and a record-store owner all went to trial on obscenity charges. The first two were acquitted; the record-store owner wasn't so lucky. And for most of the year, a battle raged over the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system. Touted as a guarantor of screen freedom on its inception in 1968, the system has come to function much like the antiquated Hays Code it was meant to replace. MPAA detractors charge that while Will Hays had his hatchet man Joe Breen, the Association's current president, Jack Valenti, has the ratings board.

1990 saw the most sustained challenge to the system in its 22-year history. Beginning last spring, a series of films, all either foreign or independent, were classified by the MPAA with X ratings (no one under 18 admitted). X was not among the original group of ratings introduced by the MPAA, but was adopted shortly thereafter at the urging of theatre-owners who feared the consequences of having no way to bar minors from certain films. But the MPAA never bothered to copyright the X, and by the mid-70s it had been appropriated almost completely by porn film-makers who never submitted their films for classification.

In the public's mind, X came to equal smut, and soon many newspapers, and virtually all television stations, refused to advertise X-rated films. Worse, the MPAA denied them their seal of approval, and since the studios and theatre chains which were MPAA members had pledged not to release or exhibit any film not bearing the Association's seal, directors working for the major studios soon found, as a standard part of their contract, a clause requiring that their films not exceed an R rating (no one under 17 admitted without accompanying parent or adult guardian). If a movie was unlucky enough to be branded with an X, the director could appeal; but if that failed, he or she was forced, by contract, to cut.

Two of the films given Xs in 1990, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and Pedro Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, were released in America by the independent distribution company Miramax. When, on appeal, the ratings board refused to overturn its decision, Miramax—not an MPAA member and therefore not bound to honour the Association's pledge—released the films without a rating and hired attorney William Kuntsler (defender of the Chicago Seven, among others) to bring suit against the MPAA. New York State Supreme Court Justice Charles E. Ramos denied the request, but his ruling found that 'the present system of rating motion pictures . . . is an effective form of censorship,' and 'anathema to our Constitution'.

Throughout the controversy, Jack Valenti refused to acknowledge any flaws in the system. Like a man who flicks a lit cigarette into the sofa cushions and then denies responsibility when the house burns down, Valenti claimed that the ratings board bore no responsibility for what happened to films after they were classified. If directors were forced to take the scissors to their work, or denied theatre bookings and newspaper or television advertising, well, that was not his concern; the ratings system, he would explain in a reasonable tone, was a self-policing practice designed to protect films from government intervention. A week after Ramos' decision, a group of film-makers, ranging in sensibility and box-office bankability from Bernardo Bertolucci through Spike Lee to Ron Howard, sent a letter to the MPAA urging the adoption of a new rating that would denote serious, adult-themed films. Soon, acknowledging the calls for change, Valenti said there was nothing so good it couldn't be fixed.

The test case came when *Henry & June*, Philip Kaufman's film about the romance between Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, received an X. Unlike Miramax, this film's distributor, Universal, is an MPAA member; and the studio's chairman, Tom Pollock, while maintaining that his company would not release an X film, made it clear that he disagreed with the rating and would do what he could to change it. Both Pollock and Kaufman announced that they planned to appeal the rating. But the week before the scheduled hearing, the Association abruptly announced that a new, copyrighted rating, NC-17 (no one under 17 admitted), would replace the X, and that *Henry & June* would be the first film to carry it. (The Greenaway and Almodóvar pictures, as well as Russ Meyer's 1970 *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, also originally an X, have since been re-classified.) But the question of the realities of the ratings system remains.

One of the most controversial aspects has long been that the identities of the board are kept secret. Nothing is known about their age, class, sex, race, religious beliefs, political affiliations, education, knowledge of movies (or any other art). The single fact that the MPAA will divulge, the one requirement of all ratings board members, is that they must be parents. Apart from the limitations this stipulation places on the age, marital status and sexual preference of the members, it suggests that the ratings system is little more than a parents' watchdog group. And that raises the question not only of why parents should have their parenting done for them, but whether in fact the MPAA guidelines do any good.

Go to any American multiplex in a reasonably populous area on a Saturday afternoon, choose the most violent action or horror picture playing, and chances are you'll find at least one family out for a day at the movies. And if parents aren't able, or willing, to accompany their kids, it's quite likely that a 10 or 12-year-old can gain admission to an R-rated movie anyway, since, unlike NC-17, the rating does not bar them outright from seeing the film. Theatre-owners know that the core moviegoing audience of America is between the ages of 12 and 16, and that turning them away means losing their best customers.

In America, no movie becomes a megahit (that is, earns $100 million or more) without that audience, and it is crucial for the studio to secure a rating that will allow them to attend, in some fashion. That's why big-budget studio films are almost never threatened with an X (ironically, *Henry & June*, which cost a modest $10 million, might actually have fared better if it had been more expensive). In 1990, the children the MPAA seeks to protect were able to see a man's arms being severed (in the megahit *Total Recall*), and another jammed through the eye with an icicle (in *Die Hard 2*), though they were spared seeing Fred Ward's bare ass in *Henry & June*. Video and the advent of cable, of course, mean that all movies are available to children, no matter what the rating.

The large question raised by the MPAA's concern with providing information for parents is why what a filmmaker can show, and what an adult moviegoer can see, should be determined according to its appropriateness for children. The answer, I fear, has to do with the studio's knowledge of who's buying the most tickets. If directors still find themselves in the position of having to bring their films in at or under an R, this could be because the studio is unwilling to sink money into a picture the core audience won't be able to see. Advertising and studio support for NC-17 films may be restricted, not by community standards, but merely by the studio's realisation that these films will only reach a limited audience. Despite Tom Pollock's gutsy stand, Universal dumped *Henry & June* in America, not even bothering to take out an ad in the Sunday papers the week before its release.

So far, American newspapers and television have accepted ads for *Henry & June* (though one network, NBC, did announce that they will run ads for NC-17 films only after 11.30 at night). But in a long tradition of blue-blooded Boston prudery, two selectmen in the suburb of Dedham, Massachusetts, pressured a local theatre into cancelling the movie's engagement. And in the 21 October *New York Times*, Janet Maslin wrote that those vigilant guardians of suburban decency 'know a shell game when they see one', fretting that NC-17 accomplishes nothing 'beyond facilitating the marketing of sexually daring or extremely violent films, and creating a certain amount of confusion'.

What Maslin doesn't seem to understand is that the needs of the audience for 'extremely violent' movies have long been satisfied by pictures that routinely receive an R, and that the raincoat crowd she envisions turning out to rub greasy elbows with decent moviegoers have long looked to get their thrills elsewhere: devotees of porn would surely be bored silly at an NC-17 picture. The scenario some people seem to fear—a clever purveyor of porn submits his film to the ratings board for classification—seems very unlikely now that porn has shifted almost entirely into the home video market, with no mainstream theatre likely to book *any* porn film, whatever its rating.

Still, there is cause to wonder if the MPAA will continue to proscribe sex more than violence, and if it will continue to be more lenient towards films from the major studios while toeing the hard line when it comes to foreign or independent pictures. Or, for that matter, iconoclastic ones. It's open to question whether *Henry & June* would have been rated less harshly if its sex scenes had not included several lesbian encounters.

NC-17 is at least a step in the right direction, and although I despair of ever seeing a ratings system that's entirely free of double standards, there are reasons to be optimistic about its advent. Tom Pollock reminded the MPAA that the studios are *members* of the Association, not minions meekly bound to follow its every decree. And it was cheering to see the solidarity shown by a disparate group of film-makers in protesting the ratings system. Ultimately, it is the film-makers who have the most to gain or lose, and they may not yet realise the power they possess in unity. If the studios retain contract clauses, film-makers could possibly defeat them by banding together and refusing to honour them. The infantilisation of American political and cultural life in the 80s and 90s might finally be stemmed by film-makers and filmgoers who let the MPAA know they have long grown past the point of having to ask for permission to act like adults.

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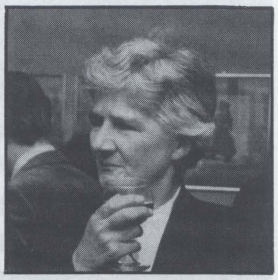


SOME OBSERVATIONS BY ***PENELOPE HOUSTON****,*
EXTRACTED FROM THIS MAGAZINE,
WHICH SHE EDITED FROM 1956 TO 1990.

SHANE

The simple story, the legendary hero: this is the Western tradition. But in developing his narrative George Stevens employs an unusually sophisticated technique; we see Shane not always as he is—a man who has killed too often, and knows it—but as he appears to the hero-worshipping small boy. As Brandon de Wilde adoringly stares, childishly imitates, drawls out the name 'Shane' on a note of proud, possessive wonder, the harsh, uncompromising story takes on its own overtones of romance. For, its hero apart, *Shane* does not idealise the West. Here are no wide open spaces, no thundering stage coaches *en route* to romantic destinations, but a tiny, isolated community, cut off by a towering mountain range, sustaining its lonely conflict not with single-minded determination but in fear and uncertainty.

Shane.

SHANE AND GEORGE STEVENS,
OCTOBER-DECEMBER 1953

A STAR IS BORN

Fundamentally, *A Star Is Born* is an immaculate showcase for a prodigious, a not wholly expected talent. One expected the vivacity and the assurance with which the musical numbers are put across—but not, quite, the extra emotional edge that makes a song like 'The Man That Got Away' so electrifying. One expected that tremulous, catch-in-the-voice manner to prove adaptable to the demands of 'straight' acting—but not, quite, the jagged, vibrating intensity of the performance. If we are to believe that Vicki Lester (*née* Esther Blodgett) has that elusive, indefinable attribute of star quality, then the actress playing her must positively dazzle us with it. But the special fascination of Judy Garland's playing is the way it somehow contrives to bypass technique: the control seems a little less than complete, and an emotion comes through, as it were, neat. In this incandescent performance, the actress seems to be playing on her nerves: she cannot but strike at ours.

A Star Is Born.

SPRING 1955

TATI

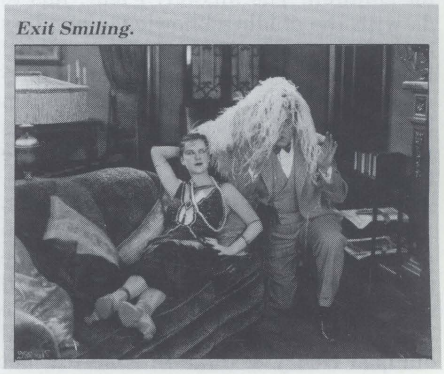
Tall, lugubrious, with a nervous geniality and mackintoshed air of perpetual caution, Tati has built for himself a screen personality that is consciously in the great tradition. It is, one feels, a deliberate act of creation—almost of manufacture. Chaplin's optimism, Keaton's sceptical tolerance, Langdon's mooning innocence, were all expressions of personalities which could be visualised in no other way. With Tati, there is a sense that the loping, stiff-legged walk, the mackintosh and the pipe, are brought out for the occasion; that the awkward hesitancy is assumed as a disguise by a very practical intelligence; and that over the shoulder of Tati the comedian watch the appraising, speculative eyes of Tati the director. One thing in his characterisation, however, rings entirely true: his avoidance of speech, with all it implies of a human involvement. There is something detached, austere, unyielding, about the ostensibly soft and clumsy Hulot.

CONSCIENCE AND COMEDY,
SUMMER-AUTUMN 1959

BEATRICE LILLIE

A silent Beatrice Lillie comedy sounds self-contradictory. How could anyone stop her talking? In fact, apparently, they couldn't. Briskly, almost audibly, she seems to be keeping up her own running commentary throughout the progress of the film, which casts her as a maid of all work, all dangling apron strings and ineffectual tussles with the ironing-board, who accompanies a touring repertory company on its travels and occasionally gets the chance to wear a rather trimmer apron on its stage . . . In 1926 she was doing precisely what she does now: discovering that the trailing ostrich feathers, so casually manipulated by other hands, become in her own an entirely unmanageable weapon; tossing a fur elegantly round her shoulders, only to find it mysteriously attaching itself like a train to her skirt; getting a stranglehold on herself with her own pearl necklace; experimenting with a hat which somehow can never quite be persuaded to

Exit Smiling.



match her face; and keeping all the time that air of baffled, sceptical or delighted acceptance which has always been her reaction to the unpredictable.

EXIT SMILING, SPRING 1960

BRANDO

Brando is a romantic actor with the manner and training of a realist. Beneath the mumbling delivery, the sense of a performer worrying at words to extract some ultimate, unrevealed meaning, beneath the effortless contemporaneity which allowed him to speak for his generation in films like *The Wild One* and *On the Waterfront*, one has also the sense of a West Coast Heathcliff struggling to get out. And in *One-Eyed Jacks* he has got out. This is a performance of monumental abstraction, in which the actor always seems to have his back against the wall, to be sitting in a corner, wrapped in a heavy cape, gazing into space. Although the film is his, he has as it were withdrawn from it into these stormy meditations; and while he deliberates, events must wait for him.

One-Eyed Jacks.

ONE-EYED JACKS, SUMMER 1961

THE ECLIPSE

In this film, everything is a matter of context. It is the force of association which makes these [closing] images of a suburban street corner, on a summer evening, come as an echo from the end of the world; as it is the juxtaposition of the mechanics of the stock exchange with an alertness to the tiny details of personality which gives these scenes their density. A man who has suffered a crushing loss on the market sits at a café table in the sunshine gravely doodling flowers on a scrap of paper. Vittoria's mother, who has just made a neat profit, haggles over the price of a kilo of pears. A cheerful drunk, sauntering down a night street, is next seen as a dead hand behind the shattered windscreen of a waterlogged car. 'There are days when a chair, a table, a book, a man seem much the same...' Beneath the cool, clean physical landscape of the Roman suburb lies the disordered landscape of the emotions. Antonioni's style has always been founded on a juxtaposition of people and places. In *The Eclipse*, however, juxtaposition has become fusion: the two landscapes are made one, the visual imagery and the mental imagery effortlessly interlock.

The Eclipse.

SPRING 1963

OLMI

It seems appropriate that Olmi should have slid so unobtrusively into the critical consciousness, since he must be one of the quietest film-makers in the world. The long, long pause before the office party gets under way in *Il Posto*, or the pre-credits dance-hall scene in *I Fidanzati*, with the sound deadened down as the people straggle in to take their places around the room, are scenes which make out of silence something almost tangible. Communication in his films is a matter of sidelong glances, wary and guarded approaches with all the lines of retreat left open, before silence is broken and dialogue takes over. Olmi's people are terribly curious about each other (as, one feels, their director is himself), but it is the surreptitious and almost impersonal curiosity of a man reading someone else's paper over his shoulder in a bus, while at the same time carrying his own identical paper. Curiosity becomes compulsive: other people are fascinating because they are other.

Il Posto.

THE ORGANISATION MAN, SPRING 1964

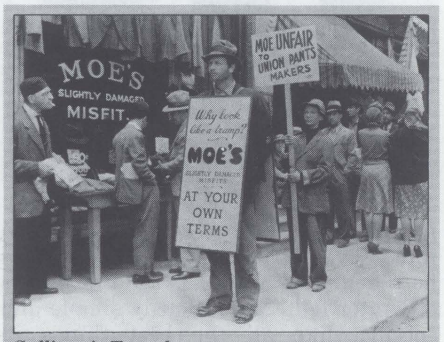
007

It is *Goldfinger*, however, which perfects the formula—and does it so conclusively that it is hard to see what Mr Broccoli and Mr Saltzman have left themselves in hand for the future . . . *Goldfinger* allows nothing to impede its sense of humour: it converts Bond into a human equivalent of the cat in the Tom and Jerry cartoons, with the same ghastly resilience and the same capacity for absorbing punishment; it can't bring itself to take Pussy Galore, with her hockey team of pilots ('Dress rehearsal went like a dream, skipper') as anything but a joke. There is an assumption—which you find, at quite the other end of the spectrum, in the Godard films—that we all know the clichés and can have a little fun with them.

WINTER 1964-65

STURGES

Paradoxically, it is this time-lag, this feeling that Griffith's idyllic Americana has somehow got cluttered up with juke-boxes, lunch-counters, Forties hair styles and the U.S. Marines, that makes Sturges' films seem so dateless now . . . Even Sturges' language, with its mixture of slang, repetitions, gibbering hesitations, and entirely formal turns of speech, is quite timeless. Above all the racket of a Sturges film, voices can be heard talking in the relaxed, balanced aphorisms of the classic English stage comedy. 'Let us be crooked but never common,' is the motto of the con man in *The Lady Eve*. 'Chivalry is not only dead; it is decomposed,' laments Hackensacker III. 'Rich people, and theorists are usually rich people, think of poverty only in the negative,' says the Wildean butler of *Sullivan's Travels*. 'The poor know all about poverty, and only the morbid rich would find it glamorous.'



Sullivan's Travels.

PRESTON STURGES, SUMMER 1965

CHARULATA

There is a characteristic Ray scene—perhaps *the* characteristic Ray scene. A shadowed interior, shuttered against the sun; rooms rather large and cluttered, with the sounds of birds or animals just penetrating the walls; two people, arriving at some moment of discovery about themselves, caught in an instant of absorbed silence. Nothing is going to be said, because emotionally we are still in a climate of Victorian reticence. Writers as far apart as Henry James and Chekhov have known the power of such moments, when the tension (not necessarily sexual tension; it can take other forms) builds up against the safety-valve of social convention, and the suspense is in the unbreakable silence.

WINTER 1965-66

FAHRENHEIT 451

To hold his very unstressed style to the end, and still to dodge banality, Truffaut needed something extraordinary. He found it in a fall of snow—and if it's true that this was fortuitous, one can only say that the rest of the film had earned such a dazzling gift from the

gods. In a makeshift shelter, an old man is passing on his memory of *Weir of Hermiston* to his young grandson, reciting the scene in which Archie talks about the agonies of life with his father, the hanging judge: 'How was I to love him? He has never spoken to me, never smiled upon me; I do not think he ever touched me . . .' Under the eye of his own stern grandfather, the boy stumbles through the words. And then, electrifying in its quietness, the time-slip, the transition to the lake icy under

Fahrenheit 451.

snow, the words now confidently repeated, with the masterly interpolation into Stevenson's text: 'And he died, as he thought he would, as the first snows of winter fell.' Marvellously simple and specific, like all the best things in *Fahrenheit 451*, this ending is a heroic enlargement of the film's range. It is as though Truffaut has drawn on everything he knows about cinema to express unshakable loyalty to the written word.

WINTER 1966-67

KEATON

Chaplin's comic personality started from English class-consciousness; Keaton's was American and free. In

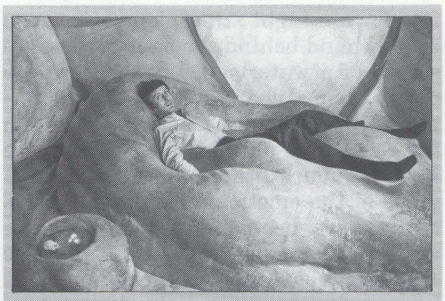
Steamboat Bill Jr.

disguise—at the beginning of *Steamboat Bill Jr*, when he turns up in moustache and beret—he could look curiously seedy, like a weasel made up as a hairdresser's assistant. It is a great moment, made much of, when the moustache comes off and the Keaton face emerges: the great blank page, on which he could write every process of thought.

THE GREAT BLANK PAGE, SPRING 1968

JE T'AIME, JE T'AIME

One has never been more aware of Resnais exploring time through timing: matchless editing, an unfailing instinct for the duration of a shot. The start of the experiment—Ridder swimming underwater, in an element at once alien and free, and surfacing to a lazy question from the girl—is a moment of



Je t'aime, Je t'aime.

perfection; in his brain-pumpkin, Ridder recaptures it like a lost, half-focused dream. Later he shies from inescapable recollections, shades them with nightmare, perhaps lies about them to himself. At the end, there's only despair and the bullet; and a last shot, inexpressibly sad and strange, of the laboratory mouse who has gone into its own (or Ridder's) past, standing under a little glass dome, nose pressed to a breathing-hole, paws hopelessly outstretched.

LONDON FESTIVAL, WINTER 1969-70

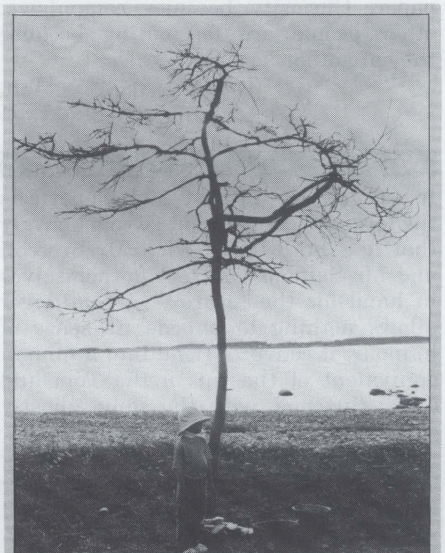
THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM

In this mystification there is exuberance; and a striking aspect of *The Spider's Stratagem* is the sense of pleasure it gives in the act of film-making—pleasure in surprise, in the tricks of landscape (like the moment when the screen of an outdoor cinema is rolled up, to reveal the country setting), in the grand cinematic *coup*, such as the return to the town at dusk, with *Rigoletto* thundering from the loudspeakers and the empty streets now occupied by an al fresco audience. Bertolucci has a gift for surrounding a claustrophobic theme with a sense of light and space; *The Spider's Stratagem* is a marvellously handsome film, both in settings and camerawork, and the balance between the clarity of the style and the (necessary) obfuscation of the subject is held as hardly before or since in his work.

WINTER 1976-77

THE SACRIFICE

In both *Nostalghia* and *Stalker* there was a sense of strain, of imagery being



The Sacrifice.

reached for, of Tarkovsky's ever-flowing water steaming away in vapid clouds. *The Sacrifice* says the same things—life as dream, or apocalyptic nightmare; spiritual obligation as sacrifice—but in a more accessible way . . . There are echoes of Bergman (of course) and of Chekhov, and once or twice I found myself thinking, most unexpectedly, of *Heartbreak House*. But essentially Tarkovsky is a mystic, inescapably drawn to the secrecy and obscurity of divine demand. Beside this awkward boulder of a film, most of the rest looked like pebbles.

CANNES, SUMMER 1986

MICHAEL POWELL

How many books of real distinction have been written by film-makers (in English, that is)? . . . The revelation, the nonpareil, is Michael Powell's *A Life in Movies* . . . It's a spellbinder's volume every inch of the way, as wily as it is honest. And almost the best of it is Powell's account of a childhood in which the boy can be most clearly seen as father to the film-maker. During the First World War, soldiers were billeted on his mother's Kentish farm, and there's a sublime page describing how the young Michael lined up his pony

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp.

with the troop out exercising, the only British film-maker to have ridden in a cavalry charge. No wonder that after that there was no holding him.

DOUBLE TAKES, AUTUMN 1986

BABETTE'S FEAST

For a kindlier view of the obligations and opportunities of an artist, turn to *Babette's Feast*, an adaptation from Isak Dinesen . . . It's a diamond-bright story, faceted with irony, humour and regret, but one realises, on rereading it, that Axel has managed the impossible and improved on Dinesen. He holds fast to the story's values, but fills out some wispy outlines of character, elaborates agreeably on the preparation of the dinner (a sigh of purest satisfaction ran through the French audience as Babette slices a truffle), creates a setting around it. The film is perhaps ten minutes too long—but what film is not? And it's beautifully played, notably by Stéphane Audran as Babette and Jarl Kulle as the one guest at the dinner who knows his *cailles en sarcophage*.

CANNES, SUMMER 1987

RAYMOND POSTGATE AND THE SOCIALIST FILM COUNCIL

Although he died almost twenty years ago, my father's name is still mentioned respectfully in the foodie columns of newspapers and magazines. Raymond Postgate's annual *Good Food Guide* and successive editions of his *Plain Man's Guide to Wine*, reinforced by his substantial journalistic output on eating and drinking, did an enormous amount to upgrade public taste and the quality of catering in Britain. But his activities extended well beyond gastronomy; he was also a historian, a classicist, a novelist and crime-writer, a book reviewer, a publisher's scout, a political journalist and, above all, a dedicated socialist.

His convictions were so strong that during the First World War he was briefly imprisoned for conscientious objection, and later was expelled from St John's College, Oxford, for pacifist activities. In 1918, his very Tory father disinherited him because he chose to marry Daisy, a daughter of the socialist MP George Lansbury (later leader of the Labour Party and a Cabinet Minister). In the General Strike of 1926, Postgate was an activist, considered to be sufficiently important to have his mail tampered with. He spent much of the 20s and 30s teaching and writing on behalf of the Labour movement, and it was this aspect of his life which brought him briefly into the world of film.

He recognised the importance of cinema as a medium for propaganda and, along with many left-wing intellectuals, resented the way in which films, British and American, reflected capitalist outlooks and values. In the early 1930s, an opportunity arose for him to do something about it. Among his and Daisy's friends was the film buff Rudolph Messel, an enthusiastic socialist and reasonably wealthy, who wrote on cinema for a left-wing weekly, the *New Clarion*, and who dabbled in amateur cinematography. At that time, the non-Communist left was fraught with committees and groupings of intellectuals (mostly centring on the Fabian Society) whose aim was to ginger up the Labour Party, then in the doldrums after the collapse of the Labour Administration of 1930-31.

Raymond Postgate in the mid-1930s.

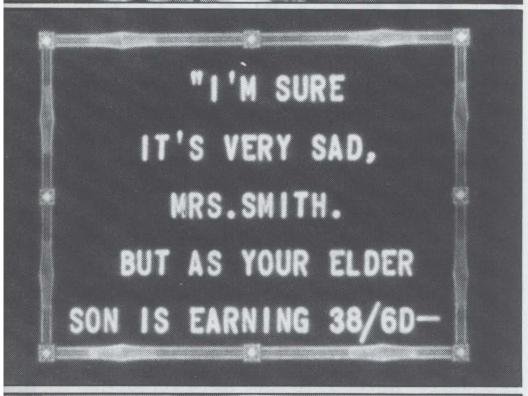
One such group was the Socialist League, which brought together Fabians (Postgate among them) and some trade unionists and Labour MPs; and Messel was probably the prime mover in persuading the league to sponsor, around 1933, the Socialist League Film Committee. This included Messel, Raymond and Daisy Postgate, and Terence Greenidge (the film critic of another left-wing magazine, *Socialist Review*); its object was to make propaganda films which would be shown at meetings of Labour Party branches, co-operatives and trade unions, to bring the message of socialism to the working classes. It soon changed its name to the Socialist Film Council, and George Lansbury agreed to be its President. Bert Hogenkamp, in his book on film and the left in Britain (*Deadly Parallels*, 1986), gave a somewhat sardonic account of the SFC and its doings.

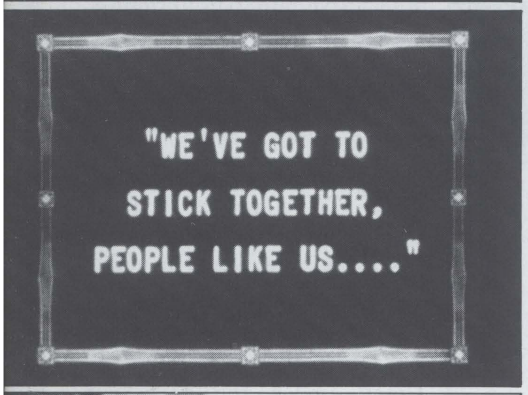
The Council had two silent 16mm films in mind to start with. In those days, long before TV, when much of the population went to the pictures regularly, the weekly newsreels at the local cinema were a unique source of visual information. The SFC planned an alternative newsreel to counter the bias towards the established political system, and Messel began to accumulate appropriate film footage from friends and readers of his column in the *New Clarion*.

What the Newsreel Doesn't Show was intended to be a series, but in the event only one issue was made, a single reel lasting about fifteen minutes, which comprised rather unexciting shots of construction in the Soviet Union under the Five-Year Plan, 'telling' shots of London and Glasgow slums, and scenes of British May Day celebrations, including Lansbury addressing a socialist rally in Hyde Park. Material for another film was collected, including footage taken by Postgate of slums in Santander, Spain, in 1934, but it was not used.

The SFC's second film was to be a fictional entertainment, a drama with a socialist, working-class ambience. Unemployment was rampant in Britain in the aftermath of the Great Depression,

The Road to Hell: (top 3) Naomi Mitchison and the Board; (bottom 2) socialist uplift.





and one serious political issue of the day was the means test, an official enquiry made into claimants' means before they could draw the unemployment insurance benefit they had contributed to. Messel and Postgate jointly prepared a script using unemployment and the means test as background.

They titled the film *The Road to Hell*. The SFC had no financial backing, so it was made on the cheap. A 16mm ciné camera was lent (permanently, it transpired) by Stafford Cripps (later Sir Stafford, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1945-50 Labour government). Novelist Naomi Mitchison, who played an important part in the film, wrote to me many years later that Cripps 'would always do anything for any socialist cause however barmy'. Friends and family were roped in as actors, for crowd scenes and as assistants; their streets and houses were used as locations. Outdoor shooting was done mainly by the Thames near Hammersmith Bridge; indoor scenes mostly in George Lansbury's house at 39 Bow Road in the East End of London ('[Lansbury] encouraged us though he was mildly amused,' wrote Naomi). It finally cost £66, which Messel paid.

The Road to Hell is a two-reeler. It tells of a working-class family whose father, Mr Smith (played by Postgate), is injured by a passing car, driven by a drunken playboy (Messel) who is preoccupied with his girl and does not even notice. Mr Smith is disabled and loses his job, but remains ineligible for unemployment benefit because his sons are earning. The elder son (played by Terence Greenidge, one of the few participants with acting experience) is courting a flapper-ish girl (Daisy Postgate); the younger son (John Arnold, a film critic who wrote under the name Ian Fox) is artistic and vulnerable.

Naomi Mitchison had a big part as Mrs Smith, who pleads her case, unsuccessfully, before a bored Public Assistance Board. In due course, the sons lose their jobs, too; the artistic son despairs and commits suicide; the other, losing his girlfriend because he is so impecunious, takes up with a smash-and-grab gang and is imprisoned, caught through a citizens' arrest by the very driver who injured Ray. The film ends with splendid in-period socialist uplift, as the distraught mother, her family in ruins, pronounces the moral—Unite and Fight the Means Test!

Unlike Naomi, who performed with aplomb, my father did not have much acting to do (which was probably fortunate). In the motor-accident scene Mr Smith was hit by the playboy's car and left in a pool of blood in the road. For black-and-white photography in those days tomato ketchup or red paint was unsuitable as mock blood because it registered too black: a brown fluid was necessary. Brown sherry was chosen. Postgate had to fill his mouth with sherry and spit it out as he fell. As often happens, takes were delayed and, instead of spitting out the sherry, he swallowed it. This happened several times. Though they did eventually get a good take, my father was too relaxed for any more filming that day.

Both films had their first showing in July 1933. Hogenkamp stated that *The Road to Hell* was not received particularly well by the 100-odd audience. However, John Grierson and Basil Wright were present and apparently undismayed by the lack of professional finish; Wright wrote: 'It is well constructed, well acted, well cut, well lit and well directed. It has economy of movement and largesse of effect.' Wright was undoubtedly making allowances, but Messel knew what he was doing and it was by no means bad for the period; certainly much more than just an amateur movie. Once one has adjusted one's sensibilities to the period, and despite some rather stilted acting, the British Film Institute's restored version still has considerable impact.

The Road to Hell met with a problem of expectations, however. Many among its audience looked for a firmer call to action; a simple working-class melodrama was not enough. For example, according to Hogenkamp, Wright found it 'defeatist' and both he and Grierson were anxious about its political message: why choose such a fortuitous circumstance to display the evils of the means test? What positive contribution had the film offered to solving the basic problem of unemployment? (Hogenkamp also recorded an absurd criticism: Paul Rotha, writing in 1973, decried the amateurishness and the 'cultured accents' of the actors—the latter an especially odd comment, the film being silent.)

What the Newsreel Doesn't Show and *The Road to Hell* did get a few showings in the Labour and co-operative movement, when a 16mm projector and a screen could be found, and, *placet* Hogenkamp, family tradition has it that they were usually well-received. But the demand for a stronger, clearer political message had not escaped the SFC; they became more ambitious and decided to make such a film; it would be more professional, would be on 35mm and would use sound. Postgate was called upon to write an appropriate script. He called it *Blow, Bugles, Blow* and it was filmed in 1933 and 1934. According to Postgate's preamble to the script: 'The object of the film is twofold: (i) to show that only by strike action can war be stopped; (ii) to show various people sex-obsessed or otherwise morbid pulled round and made whole by the effort of something genuine to do.'

My father and Messel shared a great admiration and affection for George Lansbury, and the film's message, puritanical, socialist and pacifist, was influenced by his growing obsession with the prevention of war. Though the film had a bigger budget than the 16mm productions, the casting was again very much

a family-and-friends affair. The story tells how a threatened war between England and France is prevented by simultaneous strike action in the two countries.

A young newspaper editor, Tom Wilson (played by John Arnold), has a flighty wife, Daphne (Irene Haverson, George Lansbury's granddaughter, who later married John Dugdale MP, a member of Attlee's Cabinet in the Labour Government of 1945-50). Daphne is having a desultory affair with Arthur Ellis (Terence Greenidge), a reserve army officer, whose French wife Marguerite (Vera Meynell, then wife of typographer Francis Meynell and a close friend of the Postgates) is the sister of a French trade unionist (Rudolph Messel).

Marguerite finds out about Arthur's affair and leaves him, to return to her family in France. Wilson, whose editorials have subserviently followed the bellicose politics of his boss, newspaper and arms magnate Sir Herbert Gosbore (played by the trade unionist George Hicks), rebels at a critical moment and publishes a leader advocating strike action to prevent war. This amounts to sedition; he has to go on the run, helped by some of the more politically conscious of his workforce, and produces a strike-sheet.

Strike action in France and England cannot, however, be co-ordinated because telephone and cable communication between the countries has been cut; so Marguerite is recruited by her brother to carry by hand a crucial message from the French CGT to the British TUC, in time for simultaneous general strikes to be called in both countries. She succeeds, and the warmongers are thwarted. Just as Tom Wilson's hideout is discovered and the soldiers under the command of Arthur, who has been recalled to the army, prepare to arrest him, the strike takes effect; workers persuade the soldiers to give up their arms; the British Cabinet is turned out—and laughed out—by a march on Downing Street. The war never gets started. Daphne recovers her love and admiration for Tom; Arthur discards his uniform and Marguerite returns to him.

The film departs from Postgate's script in a few minor details, and there are some odd loose ends—notably when Marguerite, having 'picked up' a military man to see her through customs as she returns to England, clearly leaves a wallet behind on the ship's bench. The event is never explained or referred to again. Although Messel called the film a talkie, its soundtrack is far from conventional: it uses symbolic noise (traffic, machinery, crowd mumble), symbolic music (national anthems, 'The Red Flag'), captions, direct speech and voice-over. Collectively, these take some getting used to today, especially as the direct speech is asynchronous, but they were perhaps less surprising features when Chaplin's *City Lights*, from which Messel and Postgate drew some ideas, was fresh in cinemagoers' minds.

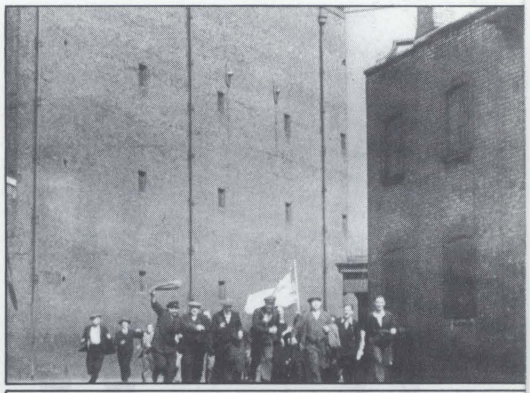
As a film, it has pace, humour and tension, and, in their context, some of the scenes of the strike and the march on Downing Street are genuinely moving. The acting, however, is mixed. Four of the principals (Tom, Arthur, Daphne and Sir Herbert) come across with considerable flair even today, and Irene Haverson, as Daphne, shows something of the family talent that later led to the success of her cousin Angela Lansbury. Vera Meynell, however, portrays Marguerite too stiffly to be believable. This is in contrast to Francis (later Sir Francis) Meynell who, in a cameo as Britain's Prime Minister, acts ineffectual pomposity with great relish.

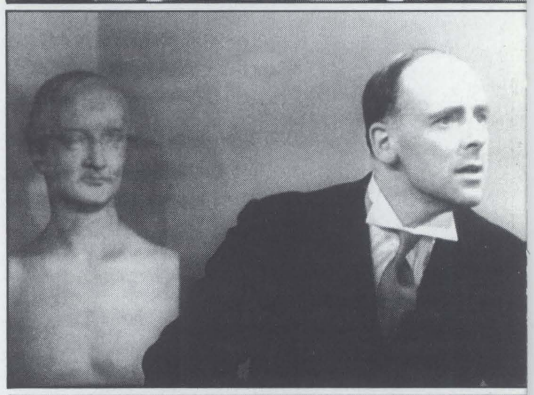
Bit parts include Phil Parrish (Lansbury's son-in-law), as the worldly-wise railway worker who ensures distribution of the offending issue of Gosbore's newspaper (which the army is trying to prevent) simply by switching labels on the bales; Peter Thurtle (Lansbury's grandson, son of Labour MP Ernest Thurtle) as his naive colleague; Postgate himself as a 'bloated Tory', with cigar and drink, listening to news of the war (with pleased interest) and the strike (with fury) on the wireless; and John Dugdale as an anxious railway official. Daisy Postgate appears in at least two walk-on parts and was also continuity girl. Other major and minor Labour and trade-union figures of the day are to be seen, but the generation able to recognise them has almost disappeared; they undoubtedly served as a side attraction to many among the film's audiences.

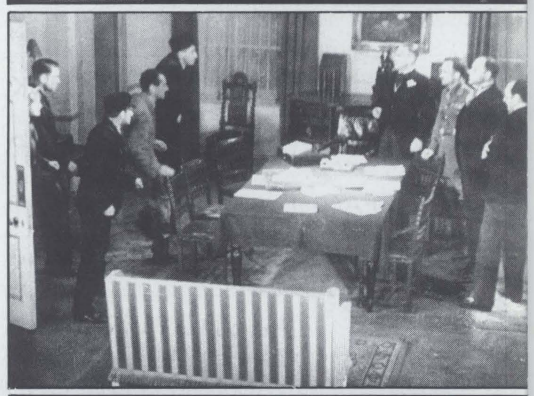
Blow, Bugles, Blow cost some £1,500, put up by Messel, and was released in 1934. However, it was less well received than *The Road to Hell* because history was moving on. Its pacifist message was greeted ambivalently by many of its audience, for the threat posed by Adolf Hitler was beginning to be recognised by the left; by 1936 it would divide the Labour movement so radically that Lansbury would be ousted from the leadership of the Labour Party for pacifism.

Hogenkamp suggested that the film was rejected in part because the most effective people in the story are middle class and educated, but I am inclined to take that as a 1980s sophistication—a minority might have felt so disposed, but generally speaking intellectuals were still *personae gratae* in the Labour movement in the mid-30s. Whatever the truth of the matter, *Blow, Bugles, Blow* had considerable merit as an innovative film of the period, but it missed its mark. Postgate was disappointed, Messel even more so. The Socialist Film Council went quietly into abeyance, Messel lost his money, and *Blow, Bugles, Blow* and *The Road to Hell* became footnotes, albeit engaging ones, to Labour history. So ended my father's brief foray into the world of left-wing film-making. ■

***Blow, Bugles, Blow*: The march on Downing Street (Francis Meynell, centre).**







A WARRIOR IN THE FIELD

LEONID ALEKSEYCHUK, A KIEV-BORN FILM-MAKER, TEACHER AND JOURNALIST, TWO OF WHOSE FILMS, *THE SONG OF IGOR'S CAMPAIGN* (1970) AND *THE HEART OF POLICHINELLE* (1973/75), WERE BANNED AS 'ALIEN TO THE SOVIET SPIRIT', REFLECTS ON SERGEI PARADJANOV AND HIS TIMES.

Sooner or later, in one way or another, every artist touches the subject of death. The more extraordinary the talent, the more likely it is that an artistic description will become personal fortune-telling, that a fantasy will turn into a prophecy. Here is one.

A dead warrior lies on a long-abandoned battlefield. The customary bird of prey sits on what remains of his almost disintegrated chest armour. There is not much to peck at: the warrior must have fallen many years or even decades ago. His body has withered and dispersed. Only black emptiness can be seen through the holes in his armour. Yet the coat of mail is rising and sinking, as though the dead hero were still alive. Indeed, the powerful respiration can be heard, and the warrior's face, untouched by decay or the vulture's beak, looks peacefully asleep, immersed in thought, listening to the irrepressible breathing of the long-vanished chest.

This image from Paradjanov is the image of Paradjanov himself. According to the doctors, the world-acclaimed director died last year of cancer, at the age of 66, yet even the humanoid vultures who clawed and lacerated him throughout his life would not deny the real cause of his painfully premature death. He fought an unequal, bloody battle and, incredibly, won it. In our time of triumphant mass conformity, when anything remotely heroic is suspect and heroism itself exists only as a parody—Hollywood's fabricated, faceless torsos, obliterating any number of enemies with a volley of machine-gun fire—let us look a genuine hero in the face and listen to his breathing.

Consider Paradjanov's filmography. Paradoxically—or logically, given the perverse logic of his time—the international fame of *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) and *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) resulted in years of desperate, state-enforced unemployment. Accused of homosexuality and alleged underground currency operations, Paradjanov spent most of the 1970s in labour camps. On his release, he was blacklisted from work in the cinema. In 1984, however, on the eve of Gorbachev's reforms, his belated professional resurrection began when he co-directed *The Legend of the Suram Fortress*. This was followed in 1988 by *Ashik Kerib*, his last film. Four films in 25 years, two working periods separated by a gap of 15 years: this is the bill to be presented to his anonymous and now collectively bankrupt debtors.

Imagine Fellini disappearing into a black hole after *I Vitelloni* and *La Strada* and re-emerging years later with, say, *Ginger and Fred* and *Intervista*, and showing us countless rolls of black leader instead of the never-realised *8½*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Roma* and *Amarcord*. This, in a sense, is what happened to Paradjanov: what would perhaps have been his highest achievements were destroyed as embryos.

The gynaecological metaphor is not inappropriate. A state of perpetual creative pregnancy was normal for Paradjanov—mercurial, spontaneous and always bursting with more ideas than he could physically realise, even under ideal circumstances. But he lived at a time when all creative conceptions, gestations and deliveries were controlled by truly macabre specialists. Helpless Soviet film-makers called them 'cinecologists'. And the latter more than justified that sarcastic coinage. In the name of an abstract perfect child, hundreds of real children were violently deformed in the womb.

But why such cruelty? And why, specifically, did Paradjanov—first and foremost a refined aesthete, disdainful of any politics in art—suffer such ferocious political persecution? Why was it suddenly so urgent to 'discover' his long-known homosexuality and to use it as a

pretext for a punishment unusually atrocious even for those harsh times? What exactly was so dangerous about Paradjanov that of the three most uncompromising and most suppressed directors of the time—Andrei Tarkovsky, Kira Muratova and himself—he was dealt the deadliest blow? What outrageous transgression had to be neutralised, and according to what logic? Or was there none? And Soviet censorship—as puzzling as it is poorly studied—was it a repressive institution consisting of unusually wicked men or a widespread mentality, shared equally by bureaucrats and their victims?

Observe the warrior in battle. 1964. The audience at the 'Ukraine' cinema in Kiev watches *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, based on a well-known story by the turn-of-the-century Ukrainian author Michailo Kotsiubinsky. Something incredible occurs.

The land, for more than three centuries subject to the most coercive Russification, since Tsarist times condescendingly called 'The Little Russia', and indeed gradually turned into a culturally insignificant Russian province, rediscovers its proud Ukrainian roots. A quarter of a century before the Ukrainian Parliament, Paradjanov fearlessly proclaims an idea, at the time automatically branded as criminally anti-Soviet, bourgeois and fascist: Ukrainian independence—Ukrainian aesthetic independence.

The film is saturated with folk art, strikingly genuine and genuinely admired by the director. But what in scores of other Ukrainian films was just a sugary pseudo-folkloric flavouring, so widespread that the Kievan studio's very name had become a symbol of poor taste and provincialism, acquires in the hands of Paradjanov epic and mythological qualities drawn from the nation's historical memory. No less amazing is Paradjanov's stylistic freedom, his lavish imagination, the beautifully controlled poetic abandon of his camera, producing one sublime image after another.

Only Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth*, although compromised by its Stalinist version of the class struggle (and, despite that, ruthlessly suppressed by the Party ideologists), was as powerful a manifestation of a distinctly Ukrainian cinema. Now, 35 years on, the long-annihilated art reasserts itself in a yet more rebellious and unrestricted form. Ninety minutes of *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* cancels centuries of political and cultural slavery.

For the duration of the screening, the director, his characters and his viewers unite in a spiritual republic autonomous from the USSR. Formally, the authorities can do little about this defiant secession: neither folk art nor adaptations of the classics are officially forbidden. Small wonder that art for art's sake has long been a more abhorred enemy of the totalitarian ideology than even serious political deviations: an autonomous language defies control, pure art becomes a political bomb.

Of course, Paradjanov's film is a work of love, not polemics, but the time itself is charged with powerful political passions. As soon as the screening is over, the dissident Ukrainian poet Vasyl Stus comes before the screen with an historic appeal: 'Those who are against tyranny, stand up!' Not many have the courage to respond positively, but those who do become heroes and martyrs of the reborn Ukrainian national movement, with Paradjanov's masterpiece on their banner.

Needless to say, the authorities immediately associate the director—ironically, an Armenian raised in Georgia—with Ukrainian 'nationalism'. Why quote-unquote? Because for officialdom in the Brezhnev era, the word had strong pejorative overtones. It was virtually a political accusation. The word is now completely out of use even in the Soviet press, but is still preferred, incredibly, by most Western journalists dealing with the Soviet reality. They would never say, let alone write, the 'Italian *Nationalist*—not National—Anthem', but that clear-cut distinction disappears from their *national* vocabulary as soon as they face any people of the USSR other than the Russians.

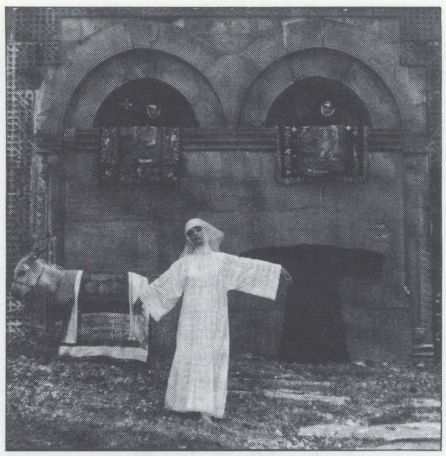
This perhaps is why every national movement of the 1960s and 70s in the USSR was largely lost on Western public opinion; why the present struggles of these movements to break away from the oppressive empire still get a cold shoulder from Western politicians; and why the world remains largely ignorant of an immense array of national cultures and great artistic names behind the still thick and heavy, though indisputably beautiful, Russian cultural curtain. Small wonder that a European leader such as Jacques Delors finds the republics' desire to have their own currency 'baffling': he must be equally baffled by their will to reassert a non-Russian culture.

Sergei Paradjanov.

Some 25 years ago, Sergei Paradjanov proved a determined and intelligent fighter for democracy. The son of three peoples—Armenian, Georgian and Ukrainian—he glorified all three by creating a masterpiece in each of their respective cinematic languages and by making the world discover three great cultural traditions, all the more dazzling for their obscurity. While the authorities were imposing on the multi-national country the artificial concept of a 'homogeneous Soviet people, an historically new entity of nations', Paradjanov passionately defended those nations' diversity and uniqueness. In purely cinematic terms, *Shadows* was a landmark for the Ukrainian cinema and *Pomegranates* for the Armenian. Many years later, the *Suram Fortress* had a similar impact on the Georgian cinema, the richest of the three.

Paradjanov's unwelcome passion for national cultures—for their primordial stages, moreover: the more removed from the Soviet period, the more genuine—could be tolerable, if not completely acceptable, had it not been aggravated by the director's fierce artistic independence: that principle long condemned in the USSR as bourgeois and decadent. Nor did his passion for collecting art or his taste for luxury, although of a purely artistic nature and hospitably open to everybody, fit into the hypocritical idea of proletarian modesty.

On top of which Paradjanov declared, to a Western journalist compiling a dictionary of Soviet film-makers, that he was everything *but* a Soviet film-maker. Fully aware of the suicidal implication of such statements, Paradjanov none the less refused to yield a single foot of his hard-won free territory. For him, absolute honesty in social behaviour was an integral part of his artistry. He quickly became a famous outcast in Soviet cinema.



The Colour of Pomegranates.

Five years of countless rejected proposals preceded *The Colour of Pomegranates*, about the eighteenth-century Armenian poet Sayat Nova. The film was shot in the Caucasus and released only after being 'bailed' by Sergei Yutkevich who recut the author's version to satisfy the censors. But even that sliced *Pomegranate* was succulent enough to confirm Paradjanov's place in the history of cinema. The authorities, however, found no better use for that place than to surround it with barbed wire. Thus began the 15-year black projection.

And what of Paradjanov's colleagues? Why were a multi-thousand army of Soviet film-makers so helpless to defend an undisputed genius? Did it consist only of cowards and bootlickers? Certainly not. There were dozens of remarkably talented and reasonably honest artists in its ranks. But talented behaviour was not among their virtues. The old Russian saying 'Why tease the geese?' became the first commandment of professional conduct among most Soviet film-makers. By adjusting to oppression instead of fighting it, they facilitated a ten times stronger oppression. Two hands are not necessary to count the artists who dared to assert the aesthetic value of uncompromised ethics.

Paradjanov, Tarkovsky, Muratova and a few others challenged the system by simply not admitting it into their artistic universe. Their stand seemed suicidal, yet despite a heavy toll eventually proved victorious. Those who compromised to survive committed virtual professional suicide. And others—who could emigrate—committed it by exercising that dubious privilege. They plunged into the American jungle and disappeared without trace. The brilliantly gifted Konchalovsky, who barely managed to become a Hollywood hired hand, is one of the most fortunate emigrants. Some fortune.

But why was defeat so total? Was there no other way to achieve an artistic victory than through heroic self-sacrifice? And why did such a personal thing as style become a charged political issue of almost global significance? Simply because it is so. The war against beauty rages everywhere. 'Socialist Realism' is not only a Soviet phenomenon. Now more or less dead as a suffocating administrative structure in its country of origin, Socialist Realism is rampant in the West as a bureaucratic philosophy of art. Despite their differences, the totalitarian ideological watchdogs and the money-grubbing showbusiness sharks have remarkably similar anti-artistic goals: to make art accessible to everybody.

In the case of the Soviet bureaucrats, however, that old aggressive tradition was nicely refreshed with a great deal of hypocrisy. While suppressing Tarkovsky at home, for instance, they exhibited the same Tarkovsky abroad as undeniable proof of their tolerance. And it was only after *Andrei Rublev*'s triumphant five-year international run—when hiding that artistic treasure in its own land became both embarrassing and impossible—that the film was given a limited release in the USSR.

Paradjanov received even more cynical treatment. While he was imprisoned, his films were shown in New York, Paris and London. The film-maker was made to sustain his jailers not only with forced labour (a fine use of creative powers), but also with handsome returns in foreign currency. To be fair, he was receiving in exchange more international exposure than the Party-approved directors whose work, ideologically perfect though it was, failed to interest anyone abroad.

However, as a financial incentive to tolerate the dissident art, that scheme worked only in very exceptional cases. Ideology was the management's obsession. No money in the world could rival it. Since strongly critical films were branded anti-Soviet and, as such, had long been extinct in the USSR, the cen-

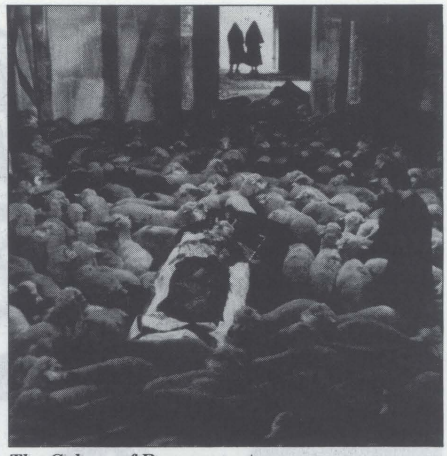
Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors.

sors' zeal was turned on films not Soviet enough or, God forbid, not Soviet at all. Kira Muratova's exquisite psychological drama *The Long Farewell* was judged to belong to that awful genre. I myself heard a hilarious justification for the film's shelving from a high-placed Party official, in charge of the Ukrainian cinema, no less. 'It would be ridiculous to deny the work's artistic quality,' the official said. 'But this is not the issue. The problem is that Muratova's characters could live anywhere—France, Italy or America—while we have to show the world the superiority of the Soviet way of life, people and values.'

Unable to find the Soviet values he was expected to glorify, Paradjanov was in an especially poignant position. The need to glorify was an organic, if not the most important part of his distinctly festive talent, not so much interpreting life as celebrating it. Psychological or narrative intricacies did not interest him. He preferred poetic ones. He was a poet first—an ancient bard, if you will, who neither discovered nor invented his personal values, but inherited them from his people. This is why there is nothing possessively hedonistic about his enjoyment of colours and forms, and why his sensuality is amazingly platonic.

Like a bewitched and reverent pantheist, for whom everything in existence is full of spirits and universal harmony, Paradjanov worshipped icons and carnival masks, admired silver engravings and woodcuts, marvelled at mirror frames and candelabras, old kitchenware and folk embroidery, glorified equine harnesses and weightless silks clinging to a beautiful girl, a peasant's base shoe and the fancy footwear of an Oriental ruler, rotten wood and the razor-sharp edge of a richly decorated Damascus steel sabre, clay pots and exquisite china vessels, sheepskin and velvet, the mossy sods on a peasant's roof in a Carpathian village and the sunburned tiles covering an Armenian monastery, smooth skin on a handsome youth and the dirty, mutilated finger of a village sexton, a sooty cauldron and a crystal wine glass, mud and gold, tree bark and rose petals, an old daguerreotype and an ancient manuscript—anything genuine, impossible to fake. In a country which for decades kept producing nothing but fakes, Paradjanov's unyielding devotion to genuine things was a heavy transgression to be ruthlessly punished. Compared with the most unpretentious object from the jammed storeroom of that crazy antiquary, the iron-clad ideology revealed its embarrassingly cardboard origin, and the life based on it emerged as a laughably cheap theatre with beggarly props. Beauty inevitably challenged the ugly system, authentic mythology collided with propagandistic fairy tales, and there could be no peace between the two extremes.

An omnipotent superpower, before which the entire world trembled, itself trembled in fear and rage before a handful of artists who dared to live and work as if the oppressive power did not exist. That was a far more intolerable challenge than their colleagues' carefully measured criticism—not rejecting the system, but aimed at its improvement—expressed in an essentially realistic tradition, accessible to management, largely addressed to it and, therefore, easier to manipulate.



The Colour of Pomegranates.

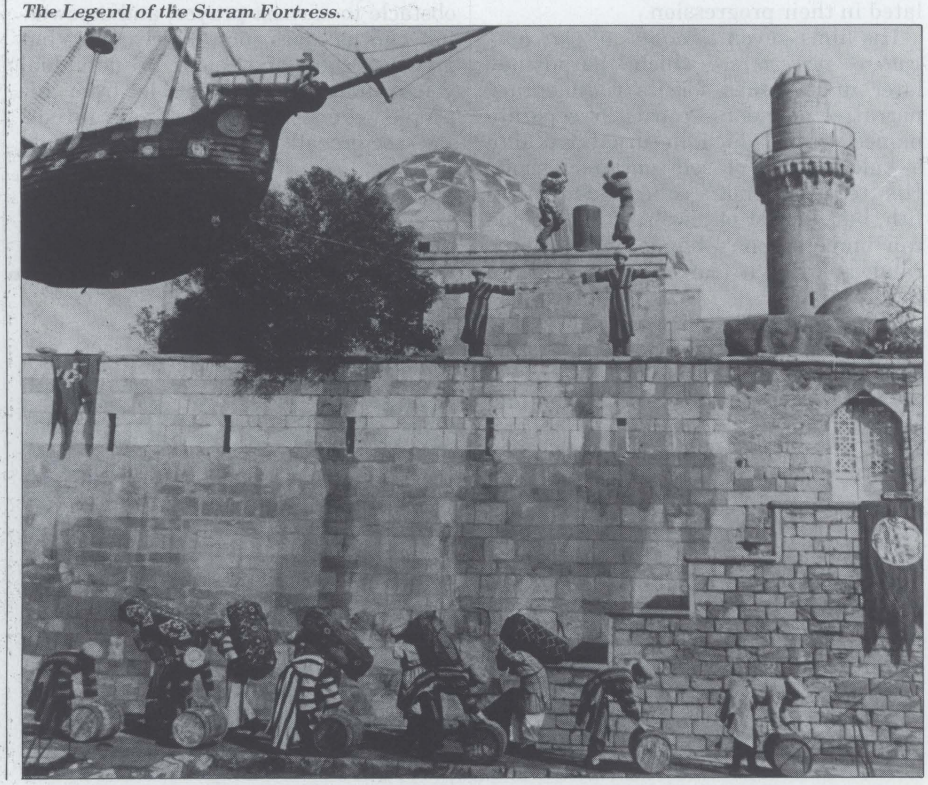
Other potential champions of artistic freedom preferred to follow the Russian proverb, 'One in the field is not a warrior.' Paradjanov denied that slavish common wisdom by plunging into battle alone. His heroic ancestors were neither shadows nor forgotten. It was with their highly ethical sense of beauty and their beautiful ethics that he measured his present, only to find it petty and dwarfish, unworthy of mention, let alone glorification. There was nothing reclusive about Paradjanov the man, who was always immersed in the thick of life; but as an artist, with his ancient passion for human greatness and nobility, he was a solitary and, if you will, a lonely figure in contemporary cinema.

Unpredictability is the key to Paradjanov's style. He delights in deceiving your expectations and making you realise that the real deceit was exactly the banality you were anticipating. It is his enraptured and enrapturing game with the spectator. Had he been a chess player, he would never have avoided a risky but beautiful move in favour of an unexciting assured point. As a filmmaker, his combinations tended to crystallise into elegantly self-contained compositions, the latter often compressed into a single exultant shot.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the elegance of Paradjanov's 'game' is to play it: to become a director for a moment and face a difficult creative problem. An entire life in a single shot? A girl, let us say, faithfully waiting for her beloved who left the village in search of fortune and vanished . . . Fallen leaves are superimposed over a snowstorm and subsequent spring streams. A pendulum swings and we end, I am afraid, in a make-up box. Never mind. Not only we amateurs, but ninety-nine per cent of professional directors have already left their fingerprints on the evidence. But no sooner are we comforted by such uniformity, deciding that a more imaginative solution does not exist, than an inexhaustible Paradjanov offers it. It is amazingly simple.

The heroine needs no external signs to count the passing hours, days, months and years, for she herself is saturated in time. She swings like a heavy pendulum, her face emerging now on the right, now on the left of a head-shaped silhouette, as black as her sorrow and as motionless as her eternal expectation. As if reflecting the girl's waning hope, the amplitude of the swinging gradually narrows, weakens.

The Legend of the Suram Fortress.



Soon only her eyes peer out, first on one side of the silhouette, then on the other, until finally she completely disappears behind it. Hope ends. Time stops. And only then, at the highest point of an incredibly dynamic stillness, the black cover falls revealing an old woman, the same girl many years later. Yet after a moment—or perhaps years—of despair and stillness, she also begins to swing, left-right, left-right, wider and wider, with more and more passionate patience.

The uninhibited stylistic exhibitionism is, in fact, disarmingly selfless, rooted in a noble folk tradition. An anonymous bard might have described a single human life with such simple monumentality. Enamoured to the point of obsession with real shapes and textures, Paradjanov never stoops to naturalism. An ax plunged into a man's skull results not in a disgusting imitation of blood and brain splashing from an actor's head, but to a breathtaking shot of red horses, slowly flying in the dying human consciousness.

For Paradjanov, a shot is not the visual proof of a written line, but a unique statement, impossible to verbalise; not a find, but a discovery. His stylistic eccentricity may prove pivotal: the movement back, indeed, leading to the future. His understanding of drama is light years away from the prevailing one. For him, the contemplation of existence is a more riveting drama than its most dynamic external manifestations. In Paradjanov, stillness is charged with energy; gesture is always poetic, ritualised, often giving birth to a dance; word gravitates towards verse and song; still life is more often motivated by its own inherent beauty than by the storyline; and each film resembles, in a sense, a collection of poetry, where the whole is reflected in every page rather than gradually accumulated in their progression.

His films—even *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, which Paradjanov later undervalued for its rudimentary narrative elements—consist of separate named stories which, in turn, break into a kaleidoscope of self-contained shots. His treasure is not a solid golden monolith, but a chest of jewels, in which one can immerse one's hands and scoop at random, without fear of misplacing the falling stones.

A dagger plunges into a snow-white wall, and blood bursts from it . . . A girl, dancing between two huge vases, receives a sudden sorrowful message and both she and the vases topple down in a faint . . . When the hero is in mortal danger, black pomegranates grow on the trees in his village; they turn white when he overcomes hardships and marries his beloved . . . Another girl listens and speaks to a fortune-teller about her beloved, but the women never look at each other. They think about destiny, and peer into it, right in the camera . . .

All that, to be sure, lies worlds apart from any sort of cinematic realism. Lavish eloquence is somehow ridiculous in the age of the television commercial.

Ashik Kerib.

Quickly losing the taste for a developed human language, the average modern mind readily responds to primitive, animalistic signals. Too bad for the modern mind. Homer can survive a couple of centuries of Stephen King.

Fortunately, times and preferences change. In search of a more secure future, modern civilisation already begins to look back towards its lost ancient roots. Paradjanov has already found them. In a time of crumbling temples, he built an indestructible one. And thanks to the good-hearted builder's generosity, the temple evokes joy rather than awe. The Gods are in perfect harmony with the Lord; holy icons suddenly wink and grin like carnival masks; magic does not interfere with the liturgy; love of earthly joys is not an obstacle to earnest prayer; and a powerful chorus does not overwhelm, but gives strength and colour to individual voices. Man is inseparable from his people, even in moments of solitude, and, reciprocally, the whole people feels the individual's predicament and rejoices at his victories.

The Legend of the Suram Fortress.

An advanced Socialist society sadly lacked these patriarchal virtues. The warrior in the field was shamelessly abandoned and left to his own devices. Yet he continued to fight, even disarmed, when the camera, his main weapon, was kicked out of his grip. He reached for any substitute: a pen, a brush, scissors. Besides directing his four features (a few earlier ones he disowned as 'garbage') and a couple of documentaries on Armenian and Georgian artists, Paradjanov wrote 23 scripts and 50 volumes of diaries. He painted canvases and composed collages, enough for a resoundingly successful exhibition in Tbilisi; and he kept spinning his famous yarns, one of which was recently shaped by Yuri Ilyenko, his friend and collaborator since their unforgettable *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, into *Swan Lake, the Zone.*

A gigantic output to be admired, studied, realised on the screen. A creator of visual legends has become a legendary character himself. Ironically, those vultures who tried in vain to peck out his eyes are quite likely to become Paradjanov's ardent admirers and diligent scholars. But whatever treatises their rapacious claws will manage to scribble, Paradjanov's corpse, abundantly flushed with their mournful droppings, will have nothing in common with the warrior in the field.

An artist's favourite motif can tell more about him than volumes of scholarship. Here is Paradjanov's. It is a jubilant gesture of hands raised to the sky. Raised while beating a festive tambourine, or raising a toast, or setting free a flock of doves. It was for this gesture, unbearable to hawkish eyes, that he paid with his life. But the doves are released. And the breathing warrior watches them mount into the sky. ■

Son of the MORNING STAR

JOHN M. CARROLL

The Texan historian John M. Carroll, an authority on General Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn, spent ten days last summer in Montana as an adviser on the most recent Custer film, *Son of the Morning Star*. This four-hour TV mini-series, starring Gary Cole as General Custer and Rosanna Arquette as his wife Elizabeth, was photographed by Kees Van Oostrum and directed by Mike Robe from a script by Melissa Mathison. It was based on the book by Evan S. Connell. John Carroll wrote this personal memoir a few days before he died, aged 62, on 14 July.

I quite literally grew up with the movies, the talkies not the silents. I loved them and still do. Since the talkies and I were born in the same year this is not an exaggerated claim. While most plots seemed to entertain me, it was the design of a movie that always held my attention. A certain shot here or a particular lighting effect there caught my eye and became stored in my seemingly illimitable memory bank never to be used again, for I found my true calling not to be the cinema but in historical research and writing. I have often joked about my perfect holiday. I would like to be locked for two weeks in America's National Archives with food and a sleeping bag, and with freedom of movement. But then I would have to forego movies and I do not think I could do that comfortably.

Somewhere along the line during my adolescence, I recognised the glamorous duty my father would perform each day (though he would probably not have called it glamorous): he was a mounted Seventh Cavalryman and had been since 1918. My father was full of tales of the Seventh Cavalry. He had met and known General Godfrey and Colonel Hare, who had enthralled him with stories of tactics and manoeuvres—or lack of them—at the battle of the Little Big Horn, of which they were both survivors. In turn, and without much prodding, my father would retell these stories, and I am certain there was elaboration in the third or fourth telling, but I didn't mind. Custer had long since become my hero, for in those days, as opposed to the 1960s and 70s, Custer *was* the hero. Errol Flynn and *They Died With Their Boots On* clinched it, even though, I later discovered, the film was marred by almost 200 historical errors.

That film spurred me into reading the first book I could find about the General. That book, however, was just the frosting on an already baked cake. I liked the first book so much that I decided to read another, but this time the author did not share my views and instead presented quite the opposite interpretation of the events in my hero's life. How was this possible? The two authors wrote of the same man, yet one hailed him as a brilliant military leader and the other called him an egocentric fool. Where was the truth?

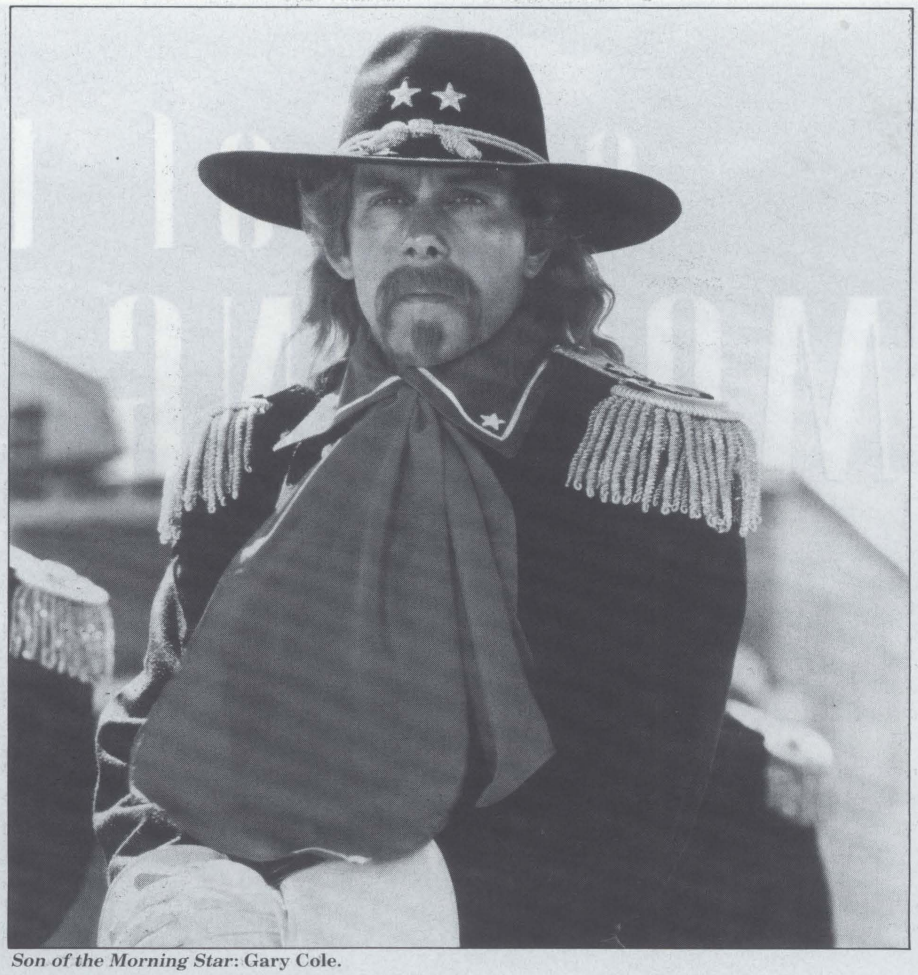
Over the years I have become quite satisfied with my own interpretations, for there have been more than two hundred books, pamphlets and articles I have either penned or edited, and each time a new one appears the image is—'I'—properly projected. Before coming to the subject of this article, let me record a rather bitterly humorous episode which occurred during the finalisation of the shooting script of *Son of the Morning Star*. The network and studio responsible for the final product had their Standards and Practices division check the script. We did not know it

then, but the party in the office responsible for the acceptance of a shooting script was a Native American, and she challenged every little detail. Finally, in a cover letter to her latest challenges, she wrote that she felt we were 'overglamorising' Custer. It took me only a minute to respond, also in a letter, that we were not doing so, and if it appeared that way it was because the truth was being told for the first time. And that has been the tempo for the entire project.

My published works were generously reviewed by Evan Connell while he was writing his great book on Custer. When it was finished, I reviewed *Son of the Morning Star* and let my personal feelings be known. The book subsequently received many honours, notably the Literary Award from the Little Big Horn Associates, an organisation devoted to the study of Custer and his times. What I did not know then was that because of his genuine shyness, Evan would redirect certain inquiries he had received to me, and that when the book was bought for filming, he suggested I be contacted. That was five years ago. A long time for a single project . . . but then the scriptwriter Melissa Mathison had the difficult task of making historical fact an agreeable vision.

I worked on the first script, making little corrections here and there, but mainly offering suggestions. Melissa, who wrote the successful movie *E.T.*, accepted most and gently rejected others. When the project was under way, major revisions began. There was first the blue, then the pink and then the yellow scripts. It was here Melissa Mathison and I really worked, and where two major revisions suggested by me came into being.

Since I was on top of all new research and publications on the Custer story, it was clear to me that slight variations in Connell's text had to be made. These were discoveries made after the publication of *Son of the Morning Star*. I guess



***Son of the Morning Star*: Gary Cole.**

the major variation was the presence of Custer's black cook, Mary Adams, in the tent when General Terry entered and verbally changed all his previous written orders. He advised Custer to do what he saw fit, but to 'hang on to the wounded'. Although Mary Adams signed an affidavit confirming the order, it had generally been viewed as suspect by almost everyone except General Nelson A. Miles.

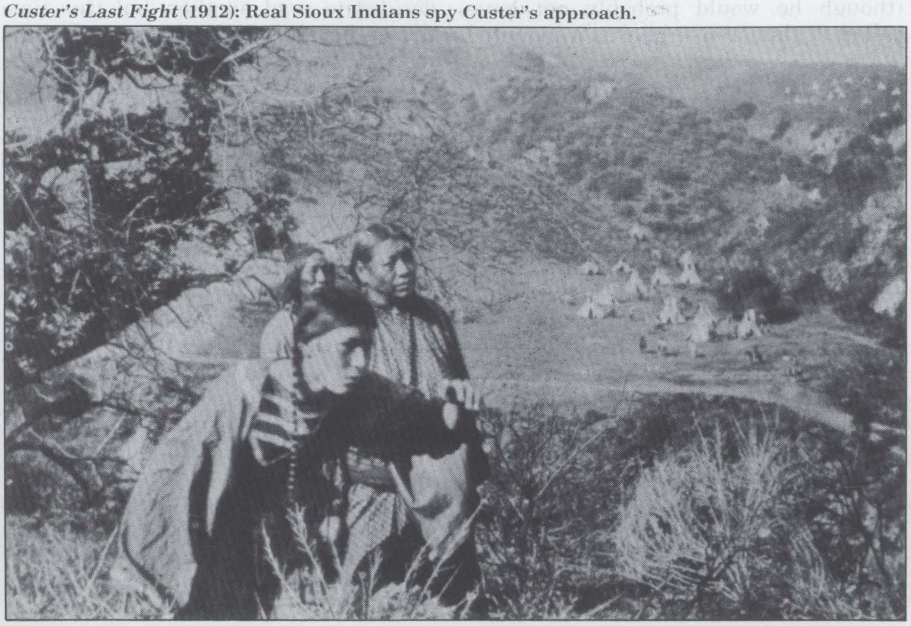
A few years ago, long after the publication of *Son of the Morning Star*, a discovery was made (and published) which proved without a doubt that Mary Adams was in the tent and did hear General Terry give Custer a free hand. This effectively quiets the Custerphobes who have long danced to the supposition that Custer disobeyed Terry's orders. Just having Mary Adams in the tent with no words to speak, speaks volumes. Thank goodness, Melissa and Mike Robe, the director, saw at once the importance of this scene and it was added to the script.

But the scene I am most anxious about is the one where the officers come to Libbie Custer's bedroom at Fort Lincoln to tell her of the disaster. I have never believed the Little Big Horn fight to have been the climax of the Custer story. The climax is the scene in the bedroom. Melissa Mathison wrote four or five sensitive lines which make this scene the heartbreaker that it became.

I was invited on location about two weeks after shooting began, and was on hand during all the filming at the newly constructed Fort Lincoln. Illness prevented me from being at subsequent filming, especially the battle scenes. I did, however, have the advantage of watching the evening rushes, but since this was after the fact, the only purpose served was to let me agree or disagree with that which had already been shot, and since many of the scenes required elaborate special effects, a disagreement counted for very little.

Had I had the same opportunity for *Little Big Man* or *Custer of the West* or any of those earlier Custer films, perhaps they would have been filmed differently, especially *Little Big Man*,

***Custer's Last Fight* (1912): Real Sioux Indians spy Custer's approach.**



***They Died With Their Boots On* (1941): Errol Flynn.**

the most disreputable of all Custer portrayals. I can still watch the first Custer/Little Big Horn film, Thomas Ince's 1912 *Custer's Last Fight*, and still have chills realising many of the Indian extras actually fought in the battle in 1876. Even the old *Flaming Frontier* was more acceptable than *Little Big Man*.

Among Hollywood's other stereotypical representations (as dictated by the times), purists tend to accept *They Died With Their Boots On*—despite all the errors. But watching the rushes of *Son of the Morning Star*, I saw what promised to be one of the grandest films on the subject, not in terms of cost, but in terms of honesty. It was as if the producers and director joined hands and pledged to stay as close to history as time and budget would allow. History is a better tale than imagination.

Of course there were errors in the scenes I watched being filmed, but they were deliberately made, each for a reason. There were three scenes, though, where I objected to content, but was argued down.

One was in Custer's tent in 1868, dead of winter, when General Sheridan, to make the orders for the Washita Campaign official, read them to Custer. One word made all the difference. Sheridan orders Custer to 'capture'—not to 'kill'—all the horses at the Washita. To this day I do not know why the change. The real orders (to kill the horses) were carried out by Custer, and from that time on he has had to bear the weight of historical judgment.

In 1874, General Mackenzie destroyed all the Indian ponies at the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon, and not one negative voice has ever been heard about his action. Are we to believe Custerphobia is the cause of all this argument? Certainly, a good military leader would destroy an enemy's mobilisation. However, since the Washita fight and its various actions were finally cut from the script, my argument for the change of the word became academic. My point, though, was that we could argue, debate and even disagree with historical fact, but one could and should not change history.

Another scene which I felt unnecessary was the love scene between the General and his wife. Melissa Mathison did not write this scene, and many of us feel it was an intrusion on private emotions, and further, it could not be supported since no one really knows their behaviour behind closed doors. In fact, the scene embarrassed me. Proper complaints were made, and only the director will know if it is to remain. I hope it is removed.

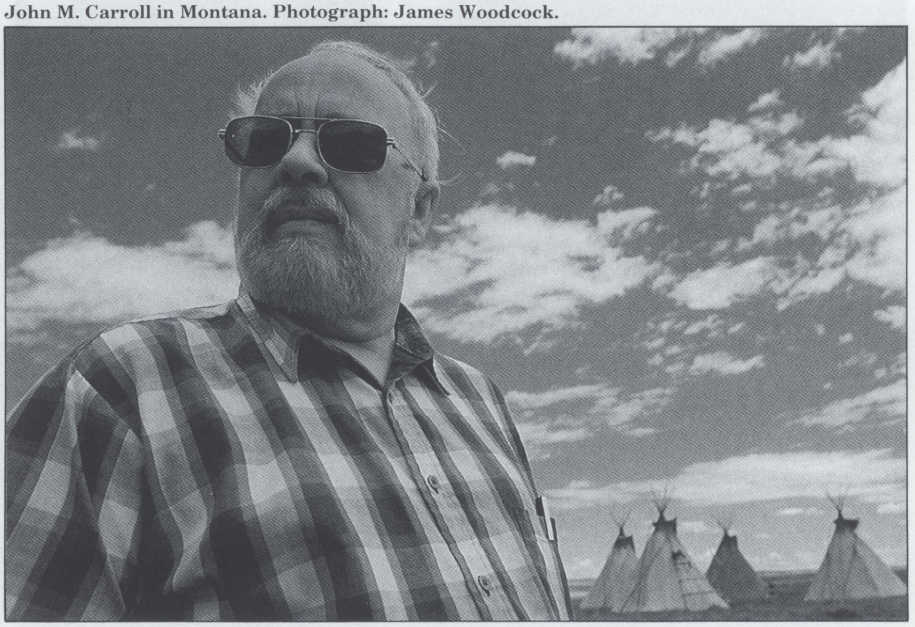
The other major historical error involves the Native Americans' attire at the Fetterman fight. This scene introduces Crazy Horse and is thus important. Sioux and Cheyenne were involved, but two warriors are there wearing Hidatsa ceremonial headgear made of magpie tail feathers. They are absolutely beautiful, but they are Hidatsa and were never worn in combat.

There are other errors, but ones due to budget limitations and geographic restrictions. Charley Reynolds, the famed scout, has become Sam Rivers—thus saving the cost of an extra actor. 'Sam Rivers' could be wherever the script required him to be. The Seventh Cavalry departs from Fort Lincoln, on what would be the final campaign for many of the soldiers, to the left instead of to the right of Custer's residence. The producer and the director quieted me with such comments as: 'Only you and fourteen others will notice.' Far more than that, but you roll with the tide.

Will this be the perfect Custer movie? No! But I can advise you now that it will be the best so far made, and may well become the standard by which all future Custer movies (and I guarantee you there will be others) will be measured. ■

Son of the Morning Star, produced by the Mount Company with the Preston Stephen Fischer Company and Republic Pictures, will be broadcast in the US in February by ABC TV.

John M. Carroll in Montana. Photograph: James Woodcock.



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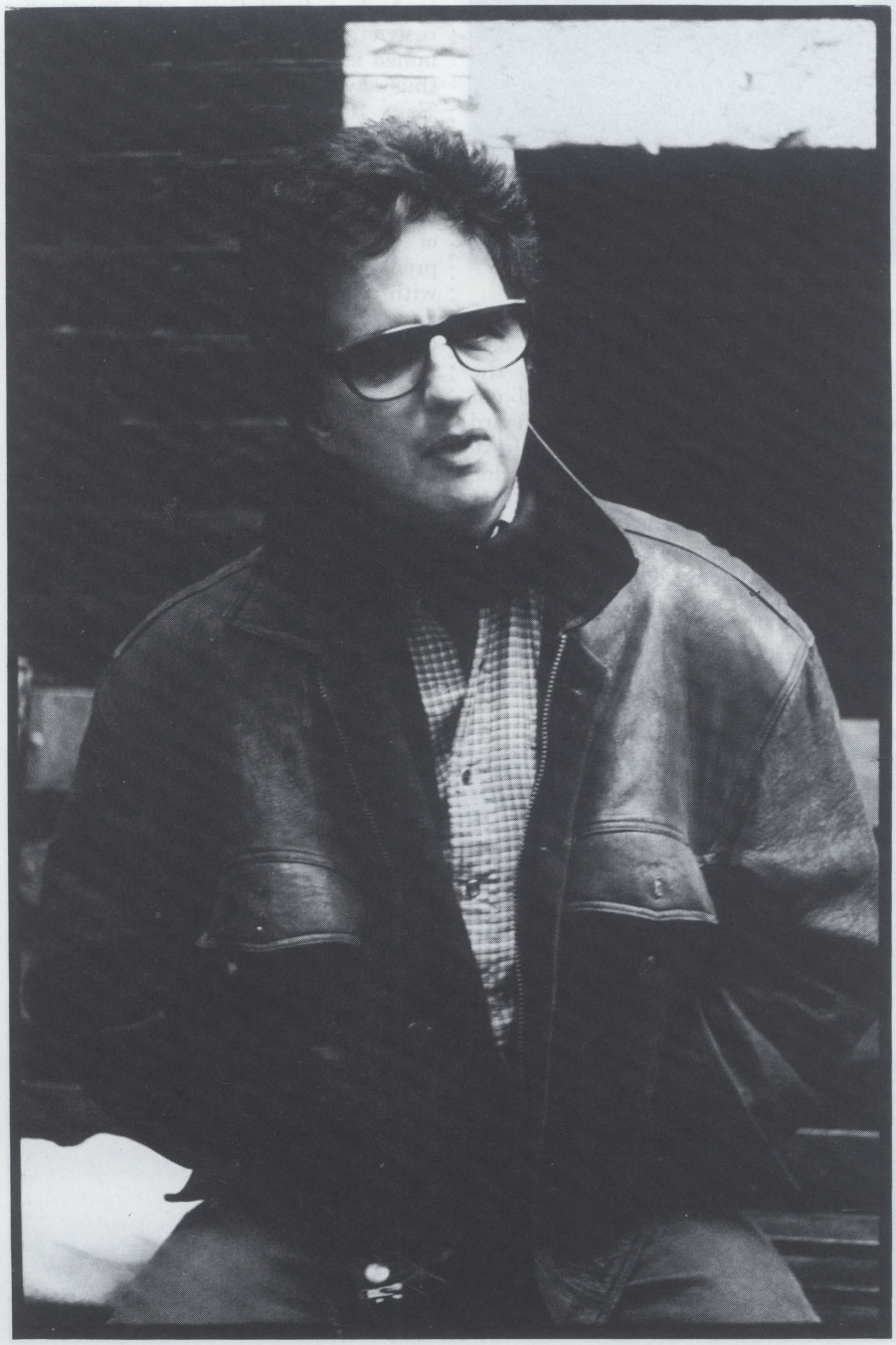
michael cimino



It's now ten years since the opening of *Heaven's Gate*. For reasons not yet fully explained, this immensely ambitious Western brought down on Michael Cimino, who conceived it and forced it through to completion, a storm of unprecedented abuse. The film lost money—$44m, according to the *Los Angeles Times* recently—and forced the sale of United Artists, the company which backed it. Thus the printed legend.

The Deer Hunter, Cimino's previous film, was attacked for its intentions. Marked by an intense, at times almost unbearable reality, the film was mistaken by some for a work of 'realism'. That particular furore, though, did nothing to affect the film's huge success. Thirteen years on, *The Deer Hunter* remains the most deeply felt and disturbing American film about the impact of the Vietnam war on working-class Americans. *Heaven's Gate* and its aftermath, however, came close to extinguishing Cimino's career. During the remainder of the 80s, he completed only two features, *Year of the Dragon* and *The Sicilian*.

Cimino was in London in October to talk-up his latest picture, *Desperate Hours*, taken from the 1954 thriller by Joseph Hayes, an earlier version of which, directed by William Wyler, starred Humphrey Bogart and Fredric March. Belying his reputation for a certain coolness towards the press, Cimino turned out to be a cordial and co-operative working film-maker, ready to expound at length, it seemed, on any subject—and notably informative, in the way many directors on the interview treadmill are not, on the specific detail of his latest film. How had the critics in the United States reacted to *Desperate Hours*, had they softened to him? 'A friend, a young critic named F. X. Feeney said, "I smell the wind shifting here." There was no controversy surrounding the opening, no protests or marches or people hanging me in effigy in the streets. The criticism was far more around the script and making a remake, which is fair game... We'll see, next time, what happens. But hopefully we've just worn them out by continuing to work.' From Cimino's tone, one gained the impression that *Heaven's Gate* was now old enough to take care of itself.

Desperate Hours is the story of a broken family, held hostage by an escaped convict and two confederates, and finally reunited through a night ordeal by fire. It was shot at the end of 1989, partly on location in Arizona, Utah and Colorado, and partly in a fully working reconstruction of a 'Georgian' American house, the architectural details of which play a key role in framing the characters. On one level, the film has no pretensions: it's an efficient thriller, the villains satisfyingly despatched, the family decisively reconciled. It was photographed by Douglas Milsome (Kubrick's cameraman on *Full Metal Jacket*) with fluid, sometimes gleaming clarity, and directed with the bottled-up

intensity Cimino brought to *Year of the Dragon*, another violent pulp-novel adaptation.

On a deeper level, however, *Desperate Hours* echoes themes embodied in the two great films on which Cimino's reputation rests. Here again we find the mending of a broken family. Tim Cornell (Anthony Hopkins), a peaceable lawyer, formerly a Vietnam hero, understands the violent mind as acutely as Nick (Robert De Niro), the calm, heroic steelworker of *The Deer Hunter*. Through cunning tempered by love, Cornell saves the wife he has betrayed; while Brenda Chandler (Lindsay Crouse), a tough special agent who has failed to save the family by exploiting the lovestruck girlfriend of the hoodlum, Michael Bosworth (Mickey Rourke), looks on in the last shot with melancholy resignation. And here again, echoing *Heaven's Gate*, we find in the glorious opening collage of a car squealing desperately on some futile mission, an unabashed celebration of the quiet, majestic landscape of the American West.

Most significantly, Cimino reprises the theme of willed self-destruction. One of the hoods, the simple Albert (David Morse), is sent by Bosworth to dispose of the body of an estate agent murdered after wandering into the family's house. Albert bungles the job and is surrounded by sharpshooters in a beautiful orange-gold canyon. He whistles a few bars of 'The Red River Valley'. A pony passes across a rifleman's sights. Albert looks about, contentment on his face, and seems to raise a pistol to his head. He is then shot to pieces.

Was this Cimino's favourite scene in the picture? 'That and one other. One reason is no secret: my love of the West. If you remove the helicopters and cars, and replace them with horses, the movie would be a Western. It has the same dynamics as a Western. I have this obsession with finding places where other people have not shot. I'd never want to film in Monument Valley, because Monument Valley belongs to Ford, because of what he felt for the place, the way he was able to evoke its real spirit. It's his sacred place. It's partly out of respect, and partly out of some quasi-religious feeling that you don't intrude on another person's place.

'Do you know many people who have committed suicide, or tried and failed? Regrettably, I do. Some who've succeeded, some who haven't. And those who've tried, using a gun, not drugs, when they know death is coming and the adrenalin rushes, all of them to a man, in the moment before they meant to pull the trigger, when they looked around, the sky was bluer than blue, the reds were redder than red, everything suddenly became very precious and extra vivid. I wanted to communicate that feeling.

'We treat our country, our environment, very, very badly. Just as Mickey Rourke, at the beginning, drives his car into that magnificent lake. Unfortunately, in America, most of these cars don't disappear. They are likely to litter the landscape for hundreds of years. We take so little notice of this space. As Melville said, "Space is the central fact of American life." I think he's quite right. No character in the movie ever notes the space. When Kelly Lynch [the lawyer who falls under Rourke's malign spell] shows up, she's looking at her watch. Not for one second does she ever really *look* at anything. But Albert, ironically the least culpable, the most childlike character, the one closest to being a real child, is the one who, in the exact moment before he dies, is able to acknowledge the space.'

Death, and particularly its ritual significance, is a recurring subtext of Cimino's films. 'The original *Desperate Hours*, the movie, is painful to watch because Bogart was so ill then, he knew he was dying. It was shot in the simplest way possible, but when the camera came in on this great actor's eyes, you can see they are focused on something far beyond the movie. It was difficult to watch because I went through that experience with John Cazale. John was dying the whole time we were shooting *The Deer Hunter*. I used to watch him between takes in the scenes where the boys are having a bit of fun, throwing food at each other in the Cadillac. I used to watch him wander up the mountain through those fields of wild flowers in his tuxedo and fur hat . . . They wanted me to fire him at the beginning of the movie, but I wouldn't do it.

'In Bogart's face one saw the same thing, and as I watched those close-ups, I kept remembering the last line of *The Leopard*. Fabrizio, the Prince of Salina, is kneeling in the street after the ball, and a priest goes by, tinkling his bell, going to administer the last rites to a dying man in some hovel, dying after this magnificent ball. And quite alone in the street, before he rises, he looks up at the sky, and as he was something of an amateur astronomer, he looks up and says, "O Star, O Star, when will you give me a less ephemeral rendezvous in the realm of perennial certitude?" When this line came back to me, watching the face of Bogart, I had to stop the film.'

The son of a successful music publisher, Michael Cimino grew up in New York City. He took a Master's degree in architecture at Yale and later, after studying acting and ballet, entered the film industry through a company making industrials and documentaries. Before the production of his first screenplay, *Silent Running* (director Douglas Trumbull, 1971), co-written with Deric Washburn and Steve Bochco, Cimino was known as a director of television commercials. He went on to write *Magnum Force* with John Milius, and to write and direct the Clint Eastwood caper movie *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974). Then came *The Deer Hunter*.

'I'm not like film-makers in their forties. I didn't go to film school, I didn't learn how to make movies, I wasn't obsessed with movies as a child, I didn't see *The Searchers* four hundred and fifty times. I don't acknowledge influences before I became a film-maker. But during and after I became a film-maker, then there were three great figures who were inescapable: Kurosawa, Ford and Visconti. They cast such long shadows. Often one feels like a firefly in summer, you light up the shadows for a season and then disappear. But their work stands apart. All of them came from a time when directors were able to make many more movies. Now we have this tragic waste of time between projects.'

The *Heaven's Gate* saga has much to do with the question of 'final cut'. *Desperate Hours* is minus one key scene—his other favourite moment in the movie—but on this occasion he is hopeful of having it restored. 'The French find out right away if there's a scene missing from a movie, they're like detectives, and I think they've already asked for this one to be put back in. It was in my opinion the best scene I've ever directed. It's a four-minute scene, in one shot; there are no tricks, no cuts, it's pure performance.'

The scene comes in the middle of the film, where at present there seems a slight ellipse. The agent Lindsay Crouse attempts to 'turn' Kelly Lynch by revealing that she herself was once attracted to a violent man. 'She's telling the truth, using her life on Kelly, like an actress, so it's a diabolical scene, really. We made several quite good takes, but they were missing that really high note. Just as I'd done with Christopher Walken in *Deer Hunter*, when without warning he spat in De Niro's face, I took Lindsay aside and told her just before the shot to take Kelly's face in her hands and kiss her with all the passion and compassion she could manage.' Cimino achieved the desired effect. 'When I said, "Cut", everybody whooped, they knew we'd hit that high C above C.'

Michael Cimino's desire to protect his privacy is complete. A few years ago, he planned an epic film, scripted by Robert Bolt, on the Irish patriot Michael Collins ('the title was *Blest Souls*, a line from Yeats'). He declines to explain why exactly Collins holds such a fascination for him—'It's too personal for me to speak of'—nor will he reveal the actor he had in mind for the lead. His enthusiasm for the project—which became a casualty of David Puttnam's departure from Columbia Pictures—remains, however, razor sharp.

The Deer Hunter was produced by two enterprising Britons, Michael Deeley and Barry Spikings. Is there not now some pioneering British producer with the gumption to take on *Blest Souls*? The script is ready; the director's copious research notes stored safely at Elstree; the locations chosen; the Irish Cabinet, having been addressed by Cimino, is convinced of the film's impartiality and has offered full co-operation; Mrs Thatcher, the director maintains, gave permission for the use of the exterior of 10 Downing Street . . .

JOHN PYM

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NEIL SIMON *(BOB HOPE'S WORLD OF COMEDY, October 1976)*

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EDGAR REITZ

'YOU CAN SEE *HEIMAT* IN TWO DAYS IN THE CINEMA, AND *DIE ZWEITE HEIMAT* IN THREE. ONE WEEK, AND YOU CAN SEE IT ALL.'

Until 1984 there were four world-famous German film directors: Fassbinder, Herzog, Schlöndorff and Wenders. Then suddenly there was a fifth: Edgar Reitz, maker of *Heimat*. The others (apart from Fassbinder, always uncategorisable) secured their international reputations by making international films, often with international stars, and increasingly abroad. Reitz has stayed in Germany; *Heimat* stayed in the small provincial corner of it where he was born, and used unknown actors, amateurs and local people. It didn't so much take a few Germans out into the world as bring the whole world into Germany—which is precisely what it showed the twentieth-century history of its fictional village to be.

Here was a prodigy—a single film bringing its maker lasting international renown. But of course *Heimat* wasn't a single film, it was more like eleven. *It* was the prodigy, without ancestors in the history of film, without peers in the present. It had begun as a long novel and only later turned into a screenplay. It covered 64 years of German history. It took 13 months and 2,000 pages to write, 282 days to film and 18 months to edit; it used 32 main actors, 15 secondary ones, 3,683 extras and 52 crew. In its original form it was a single continuous film of 18 hours. It was mostly financed by German television, but shot in 35 millimetre. In the end it was cut to just under 15½ hours and divided into 11 episodes. Still it was like no television series ever seen, for it fitted no formula, and had the scope and sweep of cinema. But it was like no film ever seen either, longer even than an Abel Gance or a Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and with the narrative and thematic complexity of a great novel. The nearest answer we have to its demands so far is the video recorder—and that fails utterly in terms of quality. But film is young, Reitz says; it is moving towards an

Edgar Reitz, Hannelore Hoger, *Die Zweite Heimat.*

audio-visual art, the forms of which we can't yet imagine. He makes the films he wants to make, and leaves the problem of their perfect presentation to the future.

Heimat was extraordinary not only technically, but as a work of history and of art. No one had yet dared to deal with the forbidden moment of German history, the *Nazizeit*, in quite this way: patiently, in detail, never forgetting the inhumanity, but focusing on the ordinary human life that went on beside it, and trying to understand the combination. No one, that is, but Reitz himself, in two earlier films, *Die Reise nach Wien* (1973) and *Stunde Null* (1976). Then people hadn't been ready to see in Germany from 1933 to 1945 anything but a terrible moral lesson to the rest of us. But in 1984, and even more today—after Vietnam and East European communism, after Cambodia and the intifada—there *is* no rest of us. The lesson of *Heimat* is that surviving and not speaking out is not monstrous but ordinary: or rather that monstrosity is ordinary in monstrous times. Our first duty is to stop such times from ever beginning: once they are there only the great will be able to do what is right, but even the weakest can do it now.

Restoring their humanity to Germans did not make them less guilty, it merely made their guilt more human. That makes good history, and good art. Judging people is necessary for action, and for the angry art that calls to action. But for understanding, and for art which is imaginative understanding, it is necessary to see everyone's point of view. That is Reitz's art in *Heimat*—for which, therefore, he was attacked as a revisionist and reactionary. For there are no monsters in *Heimat*. We do not go to Auschwitz; and we meet no Nazi leaders, but stay in Lucie's kitchen as 'der Rosenberg, der Frick und der Ley' meet briefly and invisibly in her parlour. But this is Reitz's point: to show us the little people, who suffered the *Nazizeit*, not those who made it. This is not to deny that it was evil, that its leaders were evil, and that those who sustained it participated in the evil. But it is to explore it: to see how evil uses ordinary badness (like Lucie's), and how ordinary goodness can live alongside both. Even in decent societies we must forget other people's troubles much of the time in order to cope with our own lives. 'There is a certain anarchic element in man and in society,' Reitz says, 'a principle of living-in-spite-of-everything . . . That is what I wanted to study.'

The only Nazis in *Heimat*, therefore, are little Nazis: Wilfried and his father Wiegand. They are worse than Lucie, but not very much. They are weak and selfish, vain and cowardly: that is, like her they are human, not inhuman. We see Wilfried first as a frightened little boy: and in his moment of power we see that that is what he remains. We must judge him, we may hate him, but we understand him. Reitz didn't even hate him: and that's what makes him a great artist. 'I cannot write out of hate,' he says. 'For me hate is connected to fear, and when I fear people they remain symbols, they don't come alive.' He didn't hate or fear the Wiegands, and so they came alive.

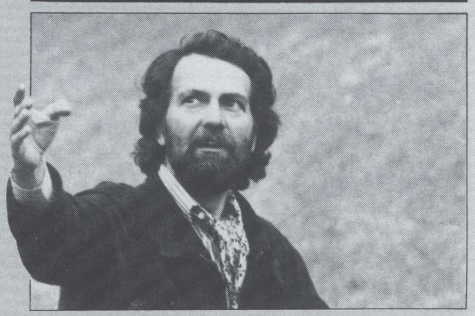
The reaction to *Heimat* was as extraordinary as the film itself. It allowed, it forced, thousands of Germans to remember their wartime lives in detail, beyond the broad category of national evil which had made their guilt ultimately impersonal. And it allowed and forced the rest of us to do the same: to give up the broad category, and distinguish individuals, degrees of blame. Since 1984, Reitz has received more than 10,000 letters, retrieving memories, thanking him for unlocking them. His favourite is from the daughter of an anti-Nazi exile, who carried on her father's resistance by refusing ever to use German or set foot in Germany, until *Heimat* restored to her her grief and her language.

I first saw *Heimat* in 1984, in the cinema. That is the way to see it, if you can. Then I saw it on television in 1985, and again in 1986. I'd felt it was a great work of art on my first day in the cinema; now I knew it. And I had to know more. *Where did this film come from? And where was its maker going now?* I read about him, I wrote to him; and I began to find out.

Edgar Reitz began to make films thirty years before *Heimat*, and for most of that time it would have seemed the last thing to come out of his career. For *Heimat* is about history and human connection; and up to then his work had almost all been made from and about newness and disconnection. He belonged to the first postwar generation in Germany: to the 'fatherless generation', who added to the general need to leave one's parents a particular need to repudiate them, because they were tainted with Nazism. Together with other artists of his age, therefore, he began as far away as he could get from the sirens which had seduced their fathers—the pride and exclusiveness of human communities.

In his earliest films there are no human beings at all. The first, made in

REITZ/FOOTNOTES



'What is *Die Zweite Heimat* about? About love and friendship. And what are love and friendship? When someone says 'I love you' or 'You are my friend', that is his free decision; so when he says 'I no longer love you' or 'You are no longer my friend', then you are no longer his lover, no longer his friend. You cannot say that to a mother or a brother.

And that is the problem: that in a free world everything can change every day, and there is no stability. Yet we long for stability, and to reconcile that longing with the longing for freedom. That reconciliation is a utopian dream, and the pursuit of that utopian dream is the subject of *Die Zweite Heimat*.'

'Women play a different role in *Die Zweite Heimat* from the one they played in *Heimat*. In *Heimat* they were the heart and centre of the film, for a simple reason. When we are children, our mothers, and perhaps our grandmothers, play the most important role in our lives; as long as we are children, everything we do is for our mother or against her. But Hermann and the others in *Die Zweite Heimat* are no longer children. In *Die Zweite Heimat*, therefore, women are what the men long for; they are the men's dreams.

At least that was my idea: but once again, I think, the women are becoming the stronger characters. I don't know why. I set out to make the men strong, but as they come to life in the film they always become the weaker ones. Women have the greater disadvantages in life, but the greater advantages as poetic figures. Women in *Die Zweite Heimat*—Clarissa, Helga, Renate, Frau Cerphal—are very strong characters, with a principle of life in them, stamped with vitality and imagination. While the men lose their way, they lose their ideals. Women have it hard, but as personalities they are stronger, they have less corruption in them.'

'The constantly recurring theme is the dream of an artistic career; and connected to that, love. There is this feeling: I work in order to be loved. That is the feeling all the characters have, whether they create music, sculptures, paintings, whatever: they connect their careers with hopes of love. And out of this there arise great and small tragedies. For they learn over and over that they are not loved for their work; they learn over and over that the wrong people love them and the right people don't. They learn over and over that the big city is full of loneliness; and they try to overcome it by founding families and friendships: by making themselves a new Heimat. This new Heimat is an antidote against fear, a search for security in personal relations which will protect one against all the difficulties of one's career—against economic need, against hostility, against competition. But it turns out that competition arises even in friendship, even in love. When competition arises in love it destroys it: and there is always competition between artists. That is the story of many of the lovers in *Die Zweite Heimat*; it's especially the story of Hermann and Clarissa.'

***Heimat*: Rüdiger Weigang (Eduard), Karin Rasenack (Lucie).**

1953, was about an empty building, the ruins of the Munich Opera. For the next thirteen years he made scientific films, industrial films, advertising films, documentaries: all experimental, all highly technical. In the early 60s he made two of the best experimental films in post-war Germany: *Kommunikation* (1961) and *Geschwindigkeit* (*Speed*, 1962-3). In *Communication*, telephones, switchboards, mail-sorting machines whirr and hum their messages, which technicians send but no one seems to receive. In *Speed*, the camera itself rushes through the world, showing that the new possibility of rapid movement affects not so much objects as ourselves.

The peak of this first, technical phase of his career came in 1964-5, with VariaVision: an ambitious attempt to shift the movement from screen to viewer. In a huge hall 36 loops of film were simultaneously projected on to 120 moveable screens; through this forest of film people walked at their own speed, constructing their own films.

In 1962, Reitz, Alexander Kluge and others had declared war on the *Väter-generation*, the 'fathers' generation' of film-makers, and the escapist kitsch they made. The Oberhausen Manifesto called for a new, relevant German cinema, for grants for new film-makers, and for a film school. When none of these demands was answered, Reitz and Kluge founded their own school; it dismissed conventional narrative cinema, and based its teachings on the critical theories of Adorno and Marcuse.

Finally, in 1966, with one of the grants he'd fought for, Reitz made his first feature film, *Mahlzeiten* (*Mealtimes*). It was the story of an idealistic young medical student who, trapped into marriage and fatherhood, ends by killing himself. The camera dwells on the young wife, Elizabeth, with fascination and fear; the fear wins, not only in the story but in the way it's told—with sardonic subtitles, and a quiet, cutting commentary spoken by Reitz himself. Some critics saw in the film simple misogyny; some saw Elizabeth as a symbol of the new materialist Germany. But if she stands for anything, I think, it is rather the old Germany, and what women always stood for there: *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*—children, the kitchen and the church, the traditional ideal of the home.

Mahlzeiten was a success, winning the First Film prize at the Venice festival in 1967. But Reitz's success was short-lived. His next film, *Cardillac*, made in 1968, was caught up in the student revolution of that year. The crew argued about making a collective work of art, and finally turned it into one, with the arguments as part of the film. No one would distribute this Godardian ragbag; Reitz was reduced to hiring halls and showing the film himself.

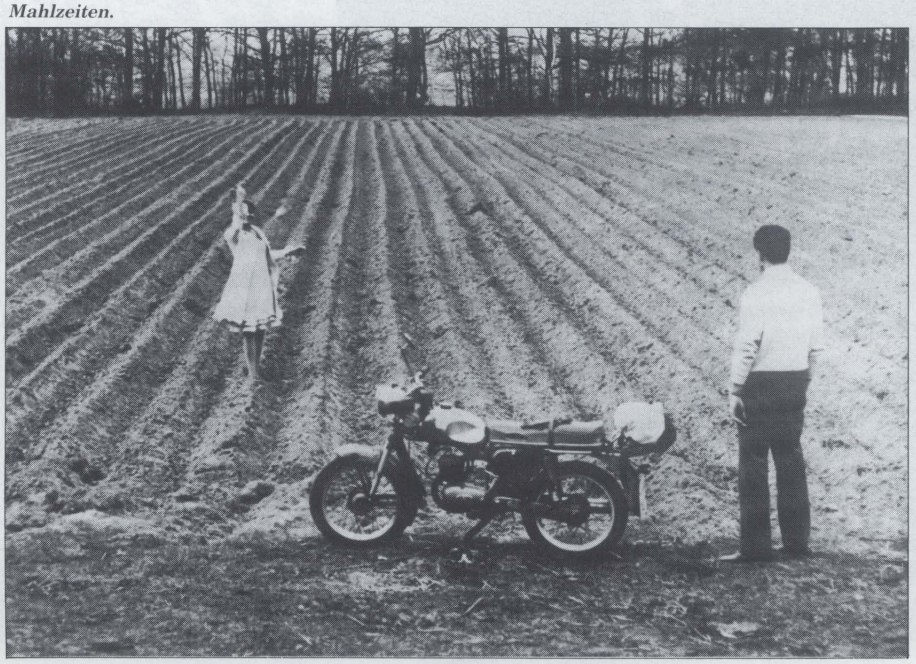
For the next ten years he was out in the cold. He continued to make short films, and to lead the fight for state subsidies for the New German Cinema. But his next two projects were, in his own words, *anti-Kino*, anti-cinema: 'I did all I could', he says, 'to make films that *couldn't* be shown in the cinema.' *Geschichten vom Kübelkind* (*Tales of the Trash-Can Kid*, 1969-70) consisted of 25 episodes varying from a minute to half-an-hour; the audience chose from a 'menu' of episodes, and at the end were invited to suggest ideas for new ones. *Das Goldene Ding* (*The Golden Thing*, 1971) began as a normal screenplay on the legend of the Golden Fleece: but Reitz turned it into *anti-Kino* too, by filming it entirely with young children.

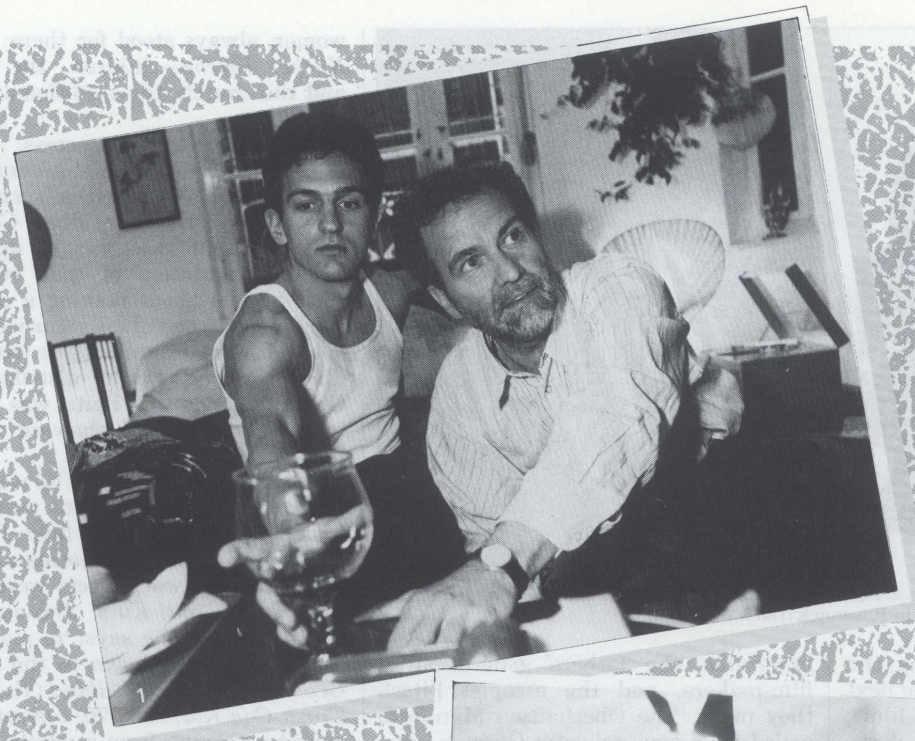
When his father died in 1970, Reitz went home for the funeral. There he found a postcard from his mother, sent from an hotel in Vienna in 1943; and in 1973 he made *Die Reise nach Wien*, *The Trip to Vienna*. It was his first return to conventional film form, and his first return to history, his own and Germany's. It was a cautious return: between himself and the Hunsrück he put three stars (Elke Sommer, Hannelore Elsner and Mario Adorf) who had, as he says, nothing to do with it at all. But *Die Reise nach Wien* contains the first hints of *Heimat*: in its humorous and homely detail, in its strong, resourceful women, even in their names—Marga Kröber and Toni Simon.

If *Die Reise nach Wien* had been a success perhaps Reitz might have gone on in this direction. But it flopped, and he was cleaned out. For the next four years he lived on short-film commissions; he worked as Kluge's cameraman on a documentary; he made an episode in the collective film *Germany in Autumn*. But as a feature film-maker he was finished. 'Between 1974 and 1978 no one would work with me,' he says. 'I wrote one script after another. I think I wrote ten screenplays, and not one was made.'

The only film he made in those years was from someone else's story. A new writer, Peter Steinbach, had written a fresh and gritty script about a small village at the end of the war. Reitz rewrote it with him, and made *Stunde Null* (*Zero Hour*). It too has clear affinities to *Heimat* in subject and style; and it was made with many of the people who would work with Reitz on *Heimat*—

***Mahlzeiten*.**





DIE ZWEITE HEIMAT

1 Reitz, Henry Arnold (Hermann).

2 Salome Kammer (Clarissa), Reitz.

3 No 11: Reitz's son Christian on real camera; carpenter Franz Bauer (right).

4 Salome Kammer (Clarissa).

5 No 8: Hermann, Schnüsschen (centre); Volker, the groom, conducts.

6 No 8: the wedding table, Eva-Maria Schneider (Marie Goot), Henry Arnold.

Steinbach on the script, Nicos Mamangakis on the music, Gernot Roll as cameraman, Robert Busch as his assistant. But again he could find no distributor. He sold the film to television, where it had a well-deserved success. But still he had failed to break back into the cinema.

Five years after *Die Reise nach Wien* he tried again, with *Der Schneider von Ulm* (1978). *The Tailor of Ulm* is about a man who built a flying machine as early as 1811. Reitz identified with the tailor twice over: as a visionary breaker of earthly restraints, who yet received no recognition. He made the film in Czechoslovakia, where it was cheaper—and also more difficult. As always, his fascination with technology and craft—with things and people working—produced some wonderful scenes with the flying machines; and the tailor's arguments with his rival Degen about the principles of flying have *Heimat*'s perfect blend of practical sense and deep meaning. But the film is laboured; like Degen it flaps too hard, and like the poor tailor himself at the end it fails to fly.

The critics agreed, and *Schneider* was savaged. After a week the film was dead. It was like *Die Reise nach Wien* all over again—but worse. *Schneider* had been very expensive; Reitz had not only lost all his own money again, but was more than £60,000 in debt. He'd worked for twenty-five years to get to this point; he'd have to work for twenty-five more to pay back what he owed. His flying machine had crashed as disastrously, as ignominiously as the tailor's.

He felt he had failed both as an artist and as a leader of his embattled generation. In December 1978, he says, he was at the end of everything. He didn't want to go on making films; he didn't want to go on living. He left Munich. He went to Sylt, a tiny island off the coast of Denmark, and sat in a small house surrounded by snow. He began to make notes, 'trying to understand why I left home at nineteen,' trying to understand how he had come from there to here.

Then, over Christmas, German television began to broadcast the American series *Holocaust*. He watched it with mounting horror. Here was the history Germany should be remembering—but not like this. This was sentimental, melodramatic; all the real living details had been smoothed out of it. Reitz set himself to remember more. He went home and listened to his mother's memories, to other people's. He saw how different it all was now, how much 'destruction and desecration' there'd been. He found another postcard, of a family in a neighbouring village sitting round a radio; and he remembered a story he'd written in the 60s, about a man who tells his wife he is going for a drink, but who goes on walking and disappears. He rented a hut in a farmyard, asked Peter Steinbach to work with him, and began on the 2,000 pages.

***Der Schneider von Ulm*: A visionary breaker of earthly restraints.**

What *Heimat* came out of, therefore, was a new vision: a traumatic realisation that something of value was gone, and that while it was there it hadn't been recognised ('Only now that Maria is dead do we know how good it was when she was there,' says Hermann). It is a film made by someone who had broken with everything it is about; who had seen only the dark side—the narrowness and intolerance—of close-knit communities, and who had worshipped modernity and freedom. He still sees the dangers of community in *Heimat*, and still feels the pull of freedom. But now he also sees the opposite—the pull of community and the dangers of freedom. He explores them both freshly, as equals, each with its own victories and losses.

The other thing that *Heimat* came out of was failure. No generation can have been more encouraged to arrogance than Reitz's generation in Germany: all children think they can do better than their parents, but with these children the whole world had agreed. Some of Reitz's earlier work was marked with that arrogance; *Mahlzeiten*'s contempt for Elizabeth, for example. But almost the strongest emotion one feels behind *Heimat* is humility: humility towards these little people, even the bad ones, humility in the camera's attention to every small detail. This is Reitz's humility; and perhaps it took the shock of failing after twenty-five years to impress it so deeply on his style.

'The hardest thing of all is simplicity,' he says. 'I didn't know this at all in my first fifteen years. I always sought the uncommon, the out of the way; I thought I had to show my originality. But with *Die Reise nach Wien*, and then with *Stunde Null*, I began to grasp the importance of a simple language. And now I think you have to try to convey even the most difficult themes, and the most complex destinies, in a simple language, in simple pictures. You don't often succeed; but when you do it's the best thing of all.'

But of course *Heimat* didn't just spring from nowhere, and it wasn't just a reaction from a lifetime of experimentation. On the contrary, it was the culmination of a lifetime of experimentation. Only someone who'd experimented with camera techniques as Reitz had done in *Speed*, with narrative form as he'd done in VariaVision and *Kübelkind*, with financing and distribution methods as he'd done all his life—only such a natural and practised innovator could have made a 16-hour cinema film suggesting that many

'I've always liked the idea of quoting in my films from my own earlier films. So for instance in *Heimat* there are echoes of *Die Reise nach Wien*; and in *Die Zweite Heimat* echoes of *Heimat*, of *Stunde Null*, of *Mahlzeiten*. In this way all my films are gradually growing into one film. And that's also what I want. I want to go on making films until I die: but to me now "film" just means "*Heimat*", so I want to go on making *Heimat* until I die. I'd like to be able to say I've only made one film in my life. That would be more or less ideal. It would stop one's self-competition too, the business of people saying they like this film but not that one. They're all your life, and you can't bear it. And this way I could say: What do you mean? It's the same film.'

'Art is connected to death. All storytelling is working against death, defeating death, because it snatches bits of life out of the jaws of death and makes them eternal. That's why it's so important to tell certain stories, for instance the stories of people who suffered under Hitler: reality killed them, but their stories can live forever. This feels like a moral duty—to help those people to live forever. But also to make little, petty happinesses and unhappinesses live forever. That's why art is also connected to love, to love of life. Because you only snatch something from the jaws of death if you love it: and for me that's the only reason to make a film. I would never want to make a film about things I hate.'

Germans are no worse than human. The *autorenfilm*—using the film-maker's own history in order to speak directly to the audience's—had been at the heart of his film principles (and practice, in *Mahlzeiten*) from the beginning. Even *Heimat*'s deep ambivalence about modernity and technological progress had been there from the beginning: that is part of the meaning of the eerie absence of human beings from *Speed* and *Communication*, except as servants of the machines.

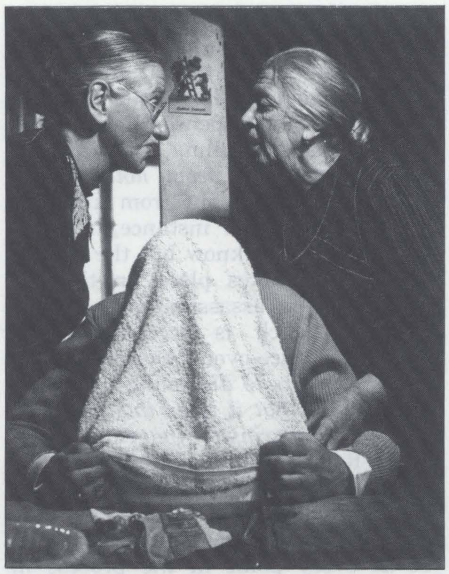
In *Heimat* Reitz celebrated a way of life which is not his. He loves, and in writing can become, a stayer like Maria, Eduard or Anton; but he himself was and is a leaver, like Paul, Ernst and Hermann. In *Heimat* he saluted the stayers, his parents' generation, who chose stability and sacrificed freedom. His new film is about the same struggle. But it is, he says, the *gegenstück*, the opposing piece. In it he returns to his own generation: the leavers, who chose freedom and sacrificed stability.

Heimat was shown at Venice in late 1984; in early 1985 Reitz started work on a new project. He began to write a series of love stories under the title *Männer und Frauen*, *Men and Women*. But soon he realised that he had returned to his own memories: memories of his twenties, when he first left home. So he made the story Hermann's. Then in it he began to see another theme. We have two lives, not one, he says: 'We are born twice, once of our mothers, and once of our own free choice.' One day these two insights came together, and he realised that the films came together too. He stuck a piece of paper on the wall of his work room with a new title: *Die Zweite Heimat*, *The Second Home*.

Die Zweite Heimat begins with Hermann still at school, his affair with Klärchen brutally ended. He makes three vows: to leave his village and never return; to have no more to do with love; and to dedicate his life to music. On his first day in Munich he breaks his second vow; and 'the story of the film', says Reitz with a grin, 'is how he breaks them all.'

Not quite the whole story. The film only begins (and ends) with Hermann; it goes out from him—as Reitz always goes out from himself—to his whole world. And this world is Reitz's second one: the world of *Wahlverwandschaften*, of chosen rather than given relationships. The connecting principle of *Heimat* was the solid, familiar one of the family. The connecting principle of *Die Zweite Heimat* is more complex and contingent, like its characters' lives: the relation of friendship. It tells the stories of Hermann's friends: twenty or so young people, connected by their work—they are artists, musicians and film-makers; by their rejection of the past and hope for the future; and by their love and competition with one another.

Heimat's Simons, Schirmers, Kröbers and Wiegands also came to a core of



A simple language: *Heimat* . . .

twenty-odd central characters. So will *Die Zweite Heimat* be as big, as risk-takingly long, as *Heimat*? Even now I didn't guess the answer: it will be longer. It has 13 parts to *Heimat*'s 11, and their average length is longer; its total planned running time is 26 hours. Reitz looks you in the eye when he tells you that. 'You can see *Heimat* in two days in the cinema,' he says, 'and *Die Zweite Heimat* in three. One week, and you can see it all.' He stares at you sternly; and then he laughs.

In other words, *Die Zweite Heimat* is typical Reitz: after the greatest experiment and risk of his life, he's making a greater one. It is longer and more expensive; it took two years instead of one to write, and it will take three and a half instead of one to film. It uses unknown actors again; and it is completely modern, set in the 60s and shot in colour, so that it must do without the mystery and glamour of the distant past. And it is more narrowly focused: not on ordinary people of all ages, but on a group of young intellectuals. Germans fear their intellectuals, Reitz says: 'You won't love me any more,' his mother said when he went to university, and he thinks she spoke for many people. So of course he is afraid for his new film. This is making him, he admits, increasingly perfectionist; but thankfully it is not stopping him. 'I have to make this film,' he says. 'I have no choice. This is my life, my subject, and if my life has meaning the film will have one too.'

Though the subject and setting of *Die Zweite Heimat* will be so different from *Heimat*, the narrative structure will be the same. In each episode one character or story will move into the foreground, while the others continue to unfold behind it; from episode to episode the foreground and background stories will interweave. Like motifs in music: or, says Reitz, like streams, springing to the surface, returning underground, then springing up once more.

So we will begin with Hermann, setting out to make his second life, his second home, in Munich. Episode 2 is the story of Juan, a Chilean student whose break with his past and freedom to choose his future are greater than Hermann's, and leave him with a greater dilemma. Episode 3 is the story of Evelyne, who comes to Munich to look for her mother and discovers instead the history of the time in which she died. Episode 4 is the story of Ansgar, Evelyne's lover, a poet who dies at the age of 25. Episode 5 is the story of Helga, who is a writer and extremist; she and Hermann enact an 'erotic comedy' about the relationship between politics and love. Episode 6 is the story of Alex, a philosophy student: we follow a day in his life—23 November 1963. Episode 7 is the story of Clarissa, the star of Hermann's music academy, and the film's other main character: she and Hermann love each other, but competition drives them apart.

Episode 8 is the story of Schnüsschen, a girl from the Hunsrück whom Hermann marries; their student wedding is the centre point of the film. Episode 9 is the story of Frau Cerphal, a rich middle-aged woman whose house is the friends' small Heimat, and whose history combines the best and worst of

. . . and *Stunde Null*.

Germany's. Episodes 10, 11 and 12 are the stories of three young film-makers, Reinhard, Rob and Stefan, and of a young half-Jewish photographer, Esther. These episodes explore German history again—the war and prewar years in Esther's story, and 1968, the year of student revolution, in Stefan's—but also the main underlying theme of the film, the theme of film-making itself. Episode 13 returns, finally, to Hermann: to his career, his love for Clarissa, and his relationship to his first Heimat in the Hunsrück.

Reitz began filming *Die Zweite Heimat* in January 1988. He is shooting Episode 11 now; he'll shoot Number 12 in the spring and Number 13 in the summer. The film will take a year to cut and complete; and will premiere at Venice in 1992.

Several things are already clear. First—and I have seen one whole episode and parts of others, and read them all—that *Die Zweite Heimat* is going to be as great a film as *Heimat*: as rich and reflective, as detailed, as daring. It is going to have a similar seriousness, and a similar humour: a serious humour, which comes not from wit or mockery, but from catching the small absurdities of life. It is going to have similarly wonderful music, again by Mamangakis: indeed, by making Hermann, Clarissa and many of the others musicians, Reitz has put music as much at the heart of *Die Zweite Heimat* as film, perhaps more. Through it he explores the disciplines and demands of art in general, and of the avant-garde music of the 60s in particular. This was his own first musical passion, so that once again his portrait of a period is based on his own memories, and full of love. But again not only love: love combined with time, homage combined with humour. The 60s experiments were often very funny, he says: and many of the film's musical scenes are sheer comedy.

To me three things are especially important about Reitz's art. Two I've already made clear: his steady gaze at German history; and despite it his patience and love for his characters—his optimism, or at least (just as rare in a modern artist) his lack of despair.

The third is a matter of method: *he is still experimenting*. Failure didn't stop him before *Heimat*, and success hasn't stopped him after. He is still experimenting with narrative: what to tell and how to tell it. It is both his greatest strength and his greatest problem that everyone's story seems to him worth telling. So alongside *Mahlzeiten*, for instance, he made *Fussnoten*, *Footnotes*, in which he stored the secondary stories that flowed in and out of the main stream. To this his making a 16-hour and now a 26-hour main stream was the logical conclusion. And within these streams some of his best work goes into the minor characters—into one-eyed Hans, or Lotti and her husband Sepp in *Heimat*; into Frau Cerphal's housekeeper, nostalgic for her days of glory, or the lovelorn registrar at Hermann's wedding in *Die Zweite Heimat*. And in the new film *how* to tell the story is once again the question. Reitz wants to tell this story, or parts of it, in the past tense: as memory. He wants to make the opposite of a suspense film, or a new kind of suspense film, in which the tension comes not from *not* knowing what will happen, but from knowing. This is explored, for instance, in Alex's story, which—we know but the characters do not—takes place on the day of Kennedy's assassination; and in Ansgar's, which is accompanied by Hermann's voice-over: *'Ansgar was the friend who was to die young . . . When you think of that it is as though everything was preparing for that early end.'*

But Reitz's experimentation is not just a technical matter. It is the heart of his film-making. He makes enormous films, which require minute planning: yet at every point in the process he remains open, ready to change. This goes for everything, from writing to directing, from plan to detail. He didn't know the ending of *Heimat* until he wrote it, and he doesn't know the ending of *Die Zweite Heimat* now. The whole idea of *Die Zweite Heimat* changed radically: it was to go, like *Heimat*, right up to the present—until Reitz noticed that his draft was 'already 30 hours long, and I'd only reached 1970'. When he comes to write a scene it has been carefully planned, and he knows exactly what the characters will do and say; but then he waits until the knowledge fades, and he can write out of impulse. 'I don't want to be like a charwoman,' he says, 'who always puts things back in the same place. I want to be like a thief, who when he goes out to steal never knows what he'll find.'

As a director he's the same, despite all the problems of people and money. 'You never know when you arrive in the morning exactly what you'll be doing,' says Gerard Vandenberg, *Die Zweite Heimat*'s first cameraman. He will never film in a studio, but only on location, where the door is open to reality. In a building where they're filming he meets an old man with a flat full of old sporting trophies—and instantly he has another tiny, rich and quirky character. In a shop one day he sees a table with expanding leaves—and instantly (or after a lot of work by his carpenter, Franz Bauer) he has a comic masterpiece: Frau Cerphal's elegant dining table, which becomes a monster of ostentation by the addition of thirteen leaves.

Above all he keeps the door open to his cast. If an actor or actress inspires him, his or her character will leap to life and grow (conversely, if one bores him the character will dwindle away and disappear). This happened in *Heimat* several times—with Eva-Maria Schneider, with Kurt Wagner, with Karin Rasenack: each time, what had started as a small part was lit up and infused for Reitz with the personality and insights of the actor, until Marie Goot, Glasisch and Lucie grew into three of the film's richest and most living characters. And it is happening again now—with Hannelore Hoger who plays Frau Cerphal, for instance, and with Susanne Lothar who plays Esther, so that their stories have grown to be two of the most important of *Die Zweite Heimat*. This spontaneity is Reitz's greatest gift of all; and I am certain that two of the best episodes will be Frau Cerphal's Number 9 and Esther's Number 11.

It's so much Reitz's gift that at times he has been tempted to pure improvisation. But he has held back: for only in a written script can he achieve what he also wants, developed ideas in their best expression. So the truth is more complicated. Reitz's greatest gift is not for spontaneity alone, but for a special combination of spontaneity and planning—a special combination of freedom and stability, which is what Hermann and the others seek for their lives. The best account of this special combination is Reitz's own, about his actors. His lines have a special combination, of naive meaning on the surface and deep meaning below: and to play them well actors must be able to play them on both levels at the same time. Of all the actors of *Heimat* the best at this was Lucie, Karin Rasenack. 'She understood all the levels, down to the deepest,' Reitz says. 'But then when she came to do it she understood nothing any more. She just worked instinctively, not knowing what she would say. Imagine,' he says, in pleasure and wonder, 'dozens of rehearsals, and she still doesn't know what she's going to say!'

This is Reitz's ideal, and he achieves it. He answers my questions slowly and searchingly, with the greatest care; his replies are profound and often moving. Then suddenly he shakes his head, and says he's no theorist: really he only does things in his films because he feels like doing them. I write this down. But then I remember Karin Rasenack; and when I look up from my notebook he's grinning. ■

'In our world, pictures are dominated by the intellect. On the TV news, for example, over the images there's always a voice, a commentary that directs us and tells us what to think. As I see it, film is the liberation of images from the voice—or that's what I would like my films to be. I would like to free the pictures.

But then there's the other side. Recently my friend Wim Wenders said in an interview that pictures are truth, *die Bilder sind die Wahrheit*. But that's not right either. When you try to tell the truth through pictures beauty always enters in, and when beauty enters in, truth vanishes. Sometimes, too, truth is what you *cannot* see. So, for instance, in Episode 11 my cameraman, Rob, is blinded: and when he's blind he sees things he previously couldn't see. In fact, pictures are just as treacherous as words, and truth resides in neither. Truth is constantly in the making before us; and the moment it's seized it instantly disappears.'

TURNING POINT

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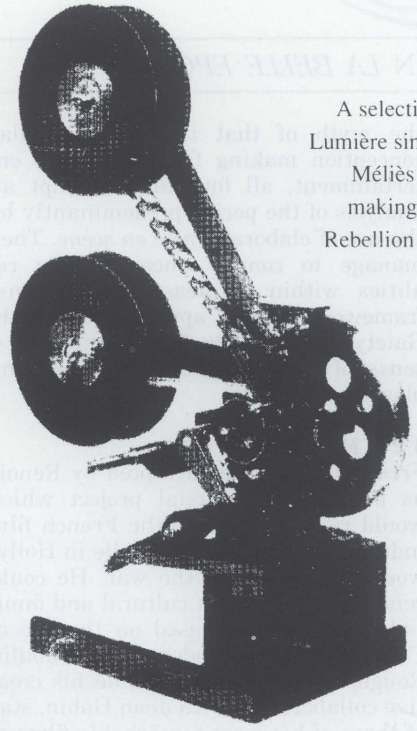

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French Cancan.

VISIONS OF PARIS

• **CAROLINE DUNANT** REFLECTS ON FOUR FILMS SET IN *LA BELLE EPOQUE* •

'Gaiety is the distinguishing characteristic of the French, let's be French.'

—*Le Courrier Français*, 12 March 1885

With the advance of the twentieth century and the collective nightmare of the World Wars, Depression and austerity, the Paris of *La Belle Epoque*, that period which roughly spanned the two decades either side of the turn of the century, came to be seen as a golden time, an era suffused with Romance. Reality had largely given way to nostalgia, a longing for a festive past, rather than a bleak and joyless present. It appeared to be a time of energy, certainty and abundance. Days and nights filled with light, colour and intensity of enjoyment in life. Confident years when artists rejoiced in the character of contemporary life and celebrated it in their work. Even the lives of the struggling underclasses were presented as vivid.

French Cancan, *Moulin Rouge*, *Madame de . . .* and *Gigi* were all made during the 1950s, and it is no coincidence that these films, which take the period of the Belle Epoque as their subject, appeared in that decade of postwar austerity and Cold War uncertainty. A decade which also saw the increasing dispersal of old city communities to the tower blocks or the suburbs. The conservative and isolationist emphasis on the privacy of the home, with a family social life based around the new television set, meant a crisis for the cinema. Thus the wide-screen, big-production ventures which brought to life a past time offering myriad delights and the city as an exotic and exciting place to be, were mostly conscious bids to lure back the audiences. A collective experience with the emphasis on entertainment. And whether you were a laundress or a lady, the Paris of the Belle Epoque meant drama, style, colour, song and dance, an opportunity for spectacle.

While these particular films present the myth of that time, the popular conception making for spectacular entertainment, all four also attempt an analysis of the period predominantly by the use of elaborate *mise en scène*. They manage to convey uncomfortable realities within a pleasurable escapist framework. They approach a truth. Gaiety as a remedy for melancholy. A sense of impending doom intensifying pleasure.

JEAN RENOIR

French Cancan was accepted by Renoir as a ready commercial project which would re-admit him to the French film industry after a period of exile in Hollywood as a result of the war. He could renew his roots, both cultural and familial, in this story based on the life of Charles Zidler, founder of the Moulin Rouge, and it would continue his creative collaboration with Jean Gabin, star of three of his most remarkable films of the 30s, in the principal role. Gabin had

begun in cabaret, music hall and at the Folies-Bergère, and was for a time leading man to Mistinguett at the Moulin Rouge. The film required an enormous cast and crew and the construction of elaborate sets at the Francoeur Studios, Saint-Maurice. Shooting began on 4 October 1954.

The Paris of *French Cancan* has an aura of nostalgia, but Renoir based the story closely on historical realities. The cancan was a show-business creation, a calculated tourist enticement which developed out of the people's *Chahut* and *Quadrille naturaliste*, which in turn derived from the *Polka-piquée*, popular from around 1845. In Seurat's painting of *Le Chahut*, the dancers are shown in a line on stage, high-kicking in unison. The cancan retained the kicks, but as Renoir's film shows, emphasised the tantalising lifting and swirling of a mass of frilly petticoats and, in a provocative and dangerous move, brought the dancers down on to the floor among the audience.

Renoir had been born in Montmartre, in 1894, when it was still a semi-rural village on a hill, predominantly working class but with a bohemian reputation. Two of his perennial and possibly conflicting concerns stem from that early environment—that of social commitment, and the world of the artist or artiste—and they are central to this story of art versus life, or the family of theatre versus the domestic ideal. In *French Cancan*, Renoir shows the conflict between reality and fantasy: the sweat and agony behind a performance, and the artifice, or illusion, of the performance itself. But the theatre also underlines the importance of the comfort of dreams, particularly for the struggling poor, and the solace to be found in art and the attempt of the imagination to triumph over adversity.

Renoir presents a precarious, exploitive society dependent on bourgeois patronage. For Zidler the entrepreneur—or rather Danglard, as he is called in the film—the Moulin Rouge is a splendid dream machine offering low life for high society, high life for small purses, and freedom from drudgery for his girls. But Danglard's obsession imposes a rigorous discipline on the dancers, and it is made clear that the price for glory is very high.

The long and complete show which ends the film works on one level as a brilliant spectacle. The girls appear to erupt from the very fabric of the building—they leap over tables, shimmy down ropes, burst through posters, and Nini, the star, drops into the crowd from the orchestra balcony. It proclaims the triumphant beginning of a great tourist attraction, but also heralds the unleashing of raw feminine energy and attack, a provocative confrontation of this exploitive male society. The camera switches between the dancers, the spectators and Danglard backstage. Gradually, all the participants merge. There is collective celebration. As Danglard puts it, '*la famille du Moulin Rouge*' is born. But the ending is an abrupt curtain down and cut to the night-time street outside, a lonely drunk reeling by in the gutter.

Nini's introduction to La Guibole: Lydia Johnson, Françoise Arnoul, Jean Gabin.

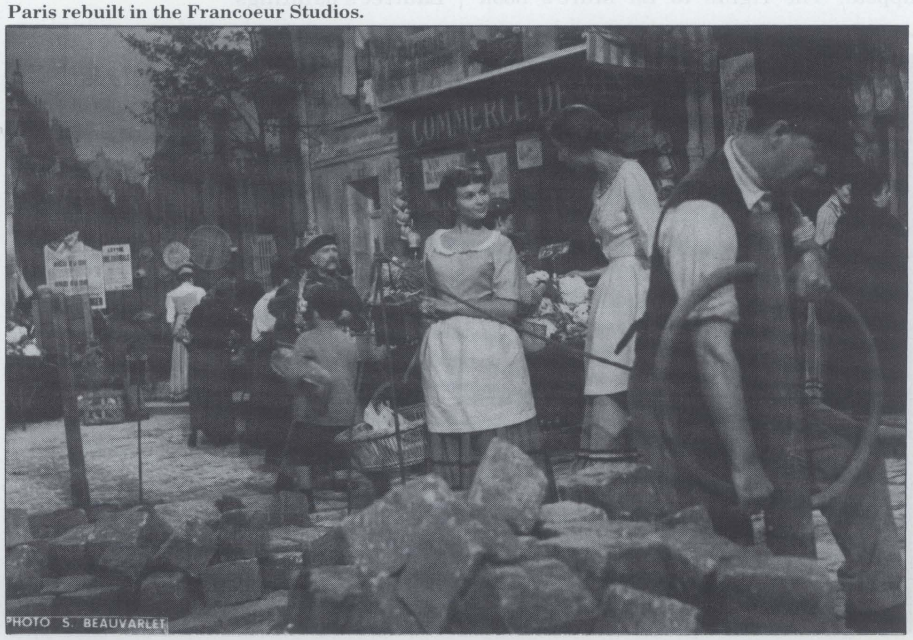
For Renoir, the film's visual qualities were paramount. *French Cancan* was a tribute to his familial roots, to the world of his father, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and others of the Impressionists. The busy morning scenes on La Butte bring to mind Utrillo, the studio creation capturing the dense textures, muddy palette and the sense of intimate exteriors of his early period. Toulouse-Lautrec's *Moulin de la Galette* was the inspiration for the scene at the Reine Blanche, the barn-like dance hall where Nini and her kind gather to dance, drink and forget the hardship of their lives.

The colours, atmosphere and climactic activity of the cancan finale were culled from Lautrec's numerous studies of the Moulin Rouge. The gently animalesque postures of the dancers at La Guibole's class recall the pastels and charcoal sketches of Degas. The statuesque Spanish beauty and challenging gaze of La Belle Abbesse could have stepped straight out of a portrait by Manet. And Nini, the heroine, is a creature from the brush of Renoir *père*, with the natural looks and easy grace of a pretty working girl, full of an eagerness for life that dances off the screen.

But Renoir goes further than mere two-dimensional pictorial representation. He begins with the vision the artists created, and then restores the dimensions of time and change. He gives movement to the moment; an illusion of life. It is not a matter of superficial copying of formal elements. The camera seemingly operates from inside the painter's conception. The most apt example of this is when Danglard takes Nini to the dancing school.

She follows him from the street, and stands to one side and looks in (as we do) when he opens the door. The camera enters and explores the room—the bare boards; the pots of red geraniums lining the little balcony at the open window

Paris rebuilt in the Francoeur Studios.



behind the piano; the pastel sketches pinned haphazard round the walls and the theatre posters in the style of Jules Chéret (a contemporary of Mucha). Resting girls sprawl in various states of undress on chairs below. They fiddle with their hair, read, scratch and wait. Danglard takes Nini in, introduces her to gutsy La Guibole and discusses his plans for the new dance in the new music hall. La Guibole demonstrates she can still high kick, and Nini is given a brief trial and accepted. Danglard leaves with her and closes the door. Degas has been brought to life.

Apart from telling the story of the Moulin Rouge, Renoir also introduces other examples of typical night life of the Epoque. Danglard's club, 'Le Paravent Chinois', which he gives up for his new project, was based on the actual Café Egyptien, and the craze for exotic dancing on display there was introduced at the Exposition Universelle in 1889. Nini, the little laundress whom Danglard 'discovers', takes her Balkan prince admirer on a tour of the fashionable *caf'conc'* scene, with the *chansonniers* of the day impersonated by contemporary stars of the 50s. Patachou as Yvette Guilbert (immortalised at the time by Toulouse-Lautrec); Jean Raymond as Paulus; and Piaf as Eugénie Buffet. Renoir shows none of the numbers in full, thus giving them the quality of memory, fragmentary and elusive. And the sequence is introduced by a series of original posters passing across the screen; for the Taverne Olympia, Scala, Folies-Bergère, Nouveau Cirque, Cabaret du Chat Noir . . .

***Moulin Rouge*: Paris by night.**

JOHN HUSTON

While editing *The African Queen* in London, Huston was shown the novel *Moulin Rouge* by Pierre La Mure. Although he found the account of Toulouse-Lautrec's life highly romanticised, he had long wanted to make a film biography of an important artist. As a painter and collector himself, and the owner of several works by Lautrec, he felt that the subject held immense appeal. The rights to La Mure's book turned out to be owned by José Ferrer, the very actor Huston wanted for the leading role. Ferrer had purchased them with the aim of dramatising the novel for the stage, but Huston convinced him that film was the more suitable medium.

Huston knew that the details of the novel were inaccurate, but the strict censorship of the 50s would not allow Lautrec's real life to be presented on the screen. He knew that the artist was remote, uninvolved, a spectator; that he put down what he saw with truth and precision, untinged by romanticism or sentimentality. The film barely touches on Lautrec's obsession with brothels and avoids his stay in an asylum. It invents love affairs, and substitutes for the prosaic fall from a chair, which actually caused his deformity, a more dramatic one down the ancestral stairs. But Huston was more interested in the re-creation of an authentic look; to make a film about, and in the style of, Lautrec's paintings.

The Moulin Rouge: Tutte Lemkow, Walter Crisham, Katherine Kath, Muriel Smith.

But the fictional Lautrec (as indeed, the real man) was the portrait of a typical Huston hero: a troubled dreamer, an emotional cripple, a misfit by nature of his deformity, his birthright and the circumstances of his career. A man who defeats himself in his personal life, yet professionally refuses to accept or even acknowledge defeat. The emphasis in the film is on the attainment of artistic greatness at personal cost, with many of his sketches, posters and paintings reproduced. In numerous scenes the spectator peers over Lautrec's shoulder to watch him sketch in close-up. The hand belonged to Marcel Vertès, Huston's costume designer, who had survived the years in Paris after the First World War by making forgeries of the artist.

Unlike *French Cancan*, much of *Moulin Rouge* was shot on the streets of Paris, frequently with hand-held camera. Filming began during a heatwave in the summer of 1952, and each location was carefully dressed to resemble the Paris of the Nineties, with an overall concern for colour and composition. The look of the picture almost achieves the equivalent of a palette. Huston wanted to try to use colour on the screen in the way that Lautrec had used it in his paintings; to flatten and render it in planes of solid hues, to do away with the highlights and the illusion of a third dimension which modelling introduced.

Instead of allowing the usual fragmentation of colour, Huston and his collaborators—Oswald Morris, the British cinematographer, and Eliot Elisofon, photographer for *Life* magazine—tried to give an effect of local colour. Smoke-filled sets were back-lit with coloured filters in order to make the actors stand out from the background as the figures do in Lautrec's work. The shadows and filler lights were coloured differently for each of the main characters. A blue-green for Lautrec, purple-

Madame de . . .: Danielle Darrieux, Vittorio De Sica.

violet for the prostitute Marie, and pink for the sympathetic model, Myriamme.

There is a prevalent night-time look to the film. Much of the background is indistinct, shadowy, sketched in with broad hasty strokes of colour as in Lautrec's work. The figures emerge from it into close-up, sharply outlined or painted in with broad, flat areas of brilliant colour—red, green, yellow, black—or they pass across the immediate foreground, their colours and skin tones made garish by the gaslight. Only once, apart from the flashbacks to his childhood, a time before the paintings, is the screen flooded with light, becoming a symbol for hope and renewed dedication.

Lautrec has learned the truth about his affair with Marie and returns to the studio. He turns on the gas jets, preparing for death, but the painting of Jane Avril (which became the famous poster for the Moulin Rouge) glows in the dark. He studies it, picks up a brush and almost absent-mindedly, turns off the jets. As he works through the night, light begins to spread outwards from the painting. Morning comes and Lautrec throws open the shutters, and sunlight fills the room as he gazes out over the rooftops.

It is ironic that Huston, who wished to achieve the effect of animated paintings on screen, filmed on location, whereas Renoir, who wished to achieve a certain actuality, used a studio. But Lautrec's world is demonstrated rather than entered into. The scenes at the Moulin Rouge are just as thrilling as in Renoir's film, but the performers are caught in distorted perspective or exaggerated poses. The precarious, exploitive nature of the society is also shown, the desperate state of the 'colourful' life of the poor of Paris, the harsh other side of the brilliant Epoque, but all is seen only in terms of Lautrec subject matter. A celebratory rather than an analytical film.

MAX OPHÜLS

Madame de . . . is almost completely studio-bound, the story for the most part acted out within elaborate interiors. Shooting began on 8 April 1953 in the Studios de Boulogne on the Seine. The story was based on a novel by Louise de Vilmorin about a pair of earrings causing a woman's downfall. Georges Annenkov, the costume designer, recalled Ophüls telling him that the jewels were the only thing which really interested him. They provided the axis around which the action constantly turned, like a carousel. A small accessory of a woman's wardrobe which imposes its presence, and comes to dominate the destinies of the characters, leading them finally to their tragic end.

The story hangs heavily on coincidence and chance, but by this device, Ophüls emphasises the small world of privilege, the gilded cage. There are nineteen transfers of the jewels, and each exchange adds depth and builds another layer of symbolic significance. Ophüls' style is one of rich visual impact, honed to perfection with his team of close collaborators, including Annenkov, photographer Christian Matras and art director Jean d'Eaubonne. And *Madame de . . .* is one of their polished essays about the dominance of objects; the decor, material surroundings and accessories of the characters forming the narrative drive and becoming the *raison d'être* of the story.

The film begins with a long tracking shot devoted to careful exploration of Louise's boudoir. In an extraordinary single-take, a woman is introduced through her possessions. All that is seen of her is a gloved hand searching through jewels, furs and dresses as she ponders what to sell. She knocks a bible to the floor, regrets aloud the absence of her mother, and finally settles on the earrings her husband gave her, on the grounds that 'I can do with them as I please.' She holds them up, and only then is her face glimpsed framed, or rather imprisoned, within an ornate mirror.

Madame de . . . is about questions of social status. Ophüls chose to place Vilmorin's contemporary story within the *fin de siècle* period, because society at that time still conformed to a set of rules, a code of honour. A society in which every social position was still clearly defined and interconnected, but was on the brink of upheaval. A perennial theme in Ophüls' work was glittering, decadent societies in decline, and his camera relentlessly pursues elegant creatures up and down palatial staircases; momentarily frames them against pillars or views them through windows, through mists of lace, or just catches their reflection in ornamental mirrors.

The restless movement betrays the transience of this *belle époque*, the fleeting nature of pleasure and happiness and the pain beneath the surface gaiety and glamour. The monochrome look of the film emphasises both the elegance and the determinedly old-fashioned

'Imprisoned within an ornate mirror.'

Madame de . . .: The dominance of objects.

nature of this world. It is rococo rather than Art Nouveau. Bernhardt is mentioned as a new phenomenon and then dismissed. A society which clings to the past, to a rose-tinted view of the *ancien régime*, deeply suspicious of the present, let alone the future.

Madame de . . . portrays the *beau monde*, the respectable world of married society where flirtation is an accepted game, but passion is not. A world which still holds the view that if a wife does not abide by the social code, she will pay the price, however beautiful, admired and seemingly secure in her position. A brilliant society that functions to music—at balls, the opera, smart restaurants and soirées—and the illicit love between Donati and Louise (Vittorio De Sica and Danielle Darrieux) develops through a series of repeated gallantries exchanged through a continuous waltz.

They begin to dance, the camera tracking them round the floor. There is a dissolve and they are dancing at another ball, then another and another. Their costumes change, but they turn ceaselessly, past pillars, paintings, sculpture, fountains, displays of ferns and palms, by tall draped windows, beneath massive chandeliers . . . the room gradually empties, the full orchestra dwindles to a quartet. It gets later. At the end, they dance alone, in their overcoats and gloves, to a single piano. A footman walks around extinguishing the lights and the scene ends in total eclipse.

In this stylised sequence, a journey is taken from frivolity to solemnity, from extravagance to simplicity, from light to dark. In fact, the whole film marks a journey away from gaiety, from the lavish boudoir to the austere church where the earrings eventually rest. The transience of this society, and the passion blossoming briefly within it, is most aptly demonstrated in a particularly breathtaking example of Ophüls' technique, in which the torn pieces of Louise's love letter from Donati turn into falling snowflakes. Nothing is permanent; these beautiful creatures are victims of chance, fate and the passage of time.

VINCENTE MINNELLI

Gigi was one of the last great Hollywood musicals, an outstanding example of the work of Arthur Freed's team at MGM, but produced as the studio system was beginning to crumble. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe arrived in Paris in March, 1957, with only a first draft of the script, no songs, no cast except Chevalier, no sets and no costumes. Minnelli began shooting in August, when the city was largely empty of its inhabitants, but as with *Moulin Rouge*, suffering a prolonged heatwave.

Unlike Ophüls, who used Vilmorin's novel as a mere stepping stone to his own very personal essay, Minnelli wished to retain the flavour of Colette's *belle époque* novel, but anticipated censorship problems. Both *Madame de . . .* and *Gigi* are about the difficulty of finding love and real happiness in societies devoted to pleasure and gaiety, but the latter is set in the world of the *demi-monde*. Gigi's aunt has been a queen among courtesans, still living in considerable style from her 'earnings'. Her mother and grandmother had followed this career, and now Gigi is being groomed to carry on the tradition. They are a family who 'instead of getting married at once . . . it sometimes happens that they get married at last.'

The Breen Office, zealous watchdog over morals, did initially object, but conceded mainly on account of the charm of the piece and because Gigi's innocence and ideals remain unsullied. The story may be about learning the arts of Romance, but Gigi is reluctant. Although she avidly follows the exploits of gentlemen-about-town with *les grandes horizontales* in magazines such as *La Vie Parisienne*, she does not want the transience of a glamorous life. It bores Gaston, but he sees himself as duty-bound to live a life of gaiety until Gigi shows him the way out. True love enshrined in marriage appears to triumph, but Honoré, the ever-young and unrepentant roué, has the first and last words.

The character of Honoré Lachaille is merely mentioned in the novel, but Colette introduced him as a character in her screenplay for the 1949 French film version by Jacqueline Audry, and he was further developed here. Maurice Chevalier, that icon of 'Gay Paree', a vital living link with *La Belle Epoque*, was the only choice for the role. His career had begun in 1900, aged twelve, singing obscene ditties to café audiences. In *Gigi*, as an elderly but spry *boulevardier*, who views the world with amused cynicism, he sets the very Parisian, charmingly naughty tone of the film.

Minnelli agreed with Lerner and Loewe to use the same format of half-spoken singing, 'patter-recitative', that they had developed in *My Fair Lady*. It had been devised for Rex Harrison's limited vocal range, but was entirely suited to Chevalier's style and legitimate to the period. Performers such as Yvette Guilbert had been delivering songs in this way since the Belle Epoque. It made *Gigi* into a kind of operetta and highly suited Minnelli's integrated style, where the musical numbers develop naturally out of the narrative. They are an expression of subliminal life, explosions of instinct, of the mind and of the heart; therapeutic, problem-solving or celebratory.

Like Ophüls, Minnelli's main concern was to maximise the visual potential of his subject. Acknowledged as one of the great stylists, he had begun in costume and set design, and the *mise en scène* was of paramount importance to him. The decor, with its symbolic use of colour, served to provide a rich commentary on the narrative and the themes of the film. It provided the essence of a place, with the attitudes and feelings of the period.

Whereas *Madame de . . .* was completely created in a studio very much according to Ophüls' own portrait of the period, *Gigi* was filmed on location with overt use of numerous specific sources. To achieve the final distinctive result, Minnelli worked closely with Cecil Beaton. Together, they toured Paris and its environs searching for locations. For Madame Alvarez's apartment, they selected a tall, appealingly faded seventeenth-century building near the Place Furstenberg, an artists' haven known as the Dakota of Paris. For Gaston's family home, the grandiose late-nineteenth-century classical exterior of the Musée Jacquemart-André was used. The fashionable rendezvous of society, the Palais de Glace, an Art Nouveau skating rink which opened in 1893, was rescued from neglect for the filming. And, of course, Maxim's, the nightly parade ground of *Tout Paris*, was the setting for several important scenes.

Beaton and Minnelli turned for inspiration to many artists near to, or contemporary with, the period. The photographs of Henri Lartigue, showing

Gigi's education: Isabel Jeans, Leslie Caron.

the contented bourgeois family filling long summer days, and the evocative studies of parks and sculpture gardens by Eugène Atget. The genre paintings by Jean Béraud, showing elegant Parisians going about their business and pleasure, and the brilliance of Manet, glossy black and sunlit white against lush green.

The mid-nineteenth-century drawings of Constantin Guys were used as a guide for the sequences in the Bois de Boulogne. Although his work was of an earlier period, the spirit of the fashionable promenade remained unchanged. They also reverted to an earlier period for the beach scenes at Trouville. Here, the paintings of Eugène Boudin inspired the tableaux of well-dressed holidaymakers gazing into the distance, rich colour against an almost watercolour-effect background of sand, sea and sky. The interiors of Gaston's family mansion and Aunt Alicia's apartment recall the values and splendours of the *ancien régime*, the latter a haven of pastoral artificiality, echoes of Fragonard amid furniture of the Louis Quinze and Seize periods.

But much of the film is determinedly *fin de siècle*. Whereas *Madame de . . .* looks back with anxious nostalgia, *Gigi* acknowledges its time and even embraces the new. *Madame de . . .* has assignations in carriages and duels at dawn, but *Gigi* makes use of the motorcar and the telephone. While the interior of Gigi's grandmother, Madame Alvarez's apartment may be cosy Biedermeier done out in enveloping Victorian red, Honoré's is aggressively modern, a hymn to the Parisian Art Nouveau designer Hector Guimard, all energetic whiplash lines, opaque glass and pale veneered furniture.

The French caricaturist SEM had sketched the actual characters Colette used as models for the novel, and his work was a major source of inspiration for the film. The opening and closing credits are played over a changing background of his drawings, and the numerous shots in profile, the use of sharp silhouette, and the striking of exaggerated, pantomime attitudes are in his satirical style. Particularly good examples of this are Gigi's lessons in Romance from Aunt Alicia, and the freeze-action tableaux of the 'Gossip' number at Maxim's, where the glamorous denizens draped along the bar examine and remark upon the entering couples.

Arthur Freed persuaded the owners of Maxim's, Louis and Maggie Vaudable, to allow scenes to be shot there. Minnelli used the mirrored walls to magnificent effect, producing endless kaleidoscopic reflections of diners, dancers and the busy details of the *fin de siècle* interior. The use of this location, perhaps the one key symbol of *La Belle Epoque*, gave the final mark of authenticity to *Gigi*. For several days, amazed locals witnessed Paris as it once was or was fabled to be.

La Belle Epoque is noted for its visual glories; art that is celebrated for its pleasurable accessibility and sensuous enjoyment of surface qualities. These four films, with their elaborate use of *mise en scène*, mirror that period and its achievement. While they all manage to convey uncomfortable realities, the industry demands of the 50s for spectacular entertainment, coupled with the strict censorship of that decade, meant that Romance was upheld. There is a truth in this. It was an extraordinary time of energy, festivity and abundance, a brief golden time indeed. But, as even some contemporaries observed, the gaiety was a panacea for the ills and unease of that *fin de siècle* society, and there was a growing awareness that they were dancing on a volcano.

Renoir, Huston, Ophüls and Minnelli all show the spectacle, the beauty and pleasures of that period, but also attempt to reveal the pain ever present beneath the gorgeous façade and the price to be paid for its upkeep. Both *French Cancan* and *Moulin Rouge* centre on their heroes, fictionalised portraits of real figures, artist and entrepreneur, whose creativity did much to shape the Epoque and the popular historical view of it. These two films are predominantly about the bohemian and the poor of Paris, the underbelly of the city, whereas *Madame de . . .* and *Gigi* are about the glittering surface, high society both respectable and doubtful. Here, the heroines are at the centre, in portraits which examine questions of social status and the decadence of these privileged *fin de siècle* worlds, poised on the brink of change. But all four films, whether from the male or female point of view, rich or poor, the creator or the object of creation, reveal the struggle beneath the brilliance, the difficulty of finding and keeping happiness in lives devoted to transient glamour. ■

Exiting Maxim's: Louis Jourdan, Leslie Caron.

INVASION OF THE PURPLE PEOPLE EATERS

The nice thing about cinema is that unexpected curve-ball. The most subversive films currently being made in America are impudent variations on traditional themes. Brian Yuzna's *Society* and Bob Balaban's *Parents* turn horror literally inside out and reveal the festering underside of the American Way. And in *Heathers*, first-time director Michael Lehmann performs a lethal hatchet job on conformism, consumerism and the cult of popularity as embodied in American high schools. They're all black-as-pitch comedies in the worst possible taste, with suicide and cannibalism high on the comic agenda.

All three make ironic use of familiar songs to underscore the satire. *Heathers* opens with a reprise of the old Doris Day number 'Que sera sera', first heard in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The lyrics, you will recall, are about a little girl asking her mother whether she will grow up to be pretty and rich. In the context of the film, this is the highest goal of the three 'megabitches', all of whom are called Heather.

Parents, which is set in 1958 so that audiences will identify the period as the Eisenhower years, picks up popular tunes of the time, 'Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White', 'Memories Are Made of This' and finally Sheb Wooley's one-off hit 'Purple People Eater'. Between them, these songs encapsulate the notion of nostalgia for what seemed a more innocent age, but one which had a hidden dark side, too. Director Bob Balaban is not, of course, suggesting that American moms and pops of the time were literally cannibals. But he is perhaps saying that there was more going on than anybody let on.

The theme tune of *Society* is the 'Eton Boating Song', but not the jolly celebration of 'blades on the feather' with which we are all familiar. This film has its own words:

***Heathers*: Mocking death.**

When you get tired of living,
When you get tired of pain,
Or when your head is spinning
And you've drunk all the best champagne,
Oh, how we'll all get richer,
Playing the holy game,
Only the poor get poorer,
And we'll feed off them all the same.

It is sung by a soprano and you wonder at first if you have heard right or whether the high tessitura has played tricks with your ears. But no, this is the theme of the film—that 'the rich have always sucked off lower-class types', and indeed that F. Scott Fitzgerald spoke truer than he knew when he wrote in *The Great Gatsby* that the rich are different from you and me.

Brian Yuzna's film pictures the rich as actually different in kind. At the climax, a father tells his adopted son, 'Jesus, Bill, you've never been one of us. You're a different race from us, a different species, a different class. We've been here as long as you. We hail from the time of Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan. It's a matter of good breeding.'

The conflict in the film is between fitting in and opting out. Set in Beverly Hills, the status-symbol capital of the West Coast, the plot focuses on the need to 'make a wonderful contribution to society'. That is to be rich, wear the same clothes as your peers and abide by society's rules. As our hero's psychiatrist points out, 'If you don't follow the rules, bad things happen. Now some people make the rules, other people follow them. It's a question of what you're born to.'

Yuzna and his assured script-writers, Woody Keith and Ricky Fry, depict the class struggle in terms of a conspiracy theory. All American politics, they imply, are riddled with 'aliens', the ultra-rich who grind the face of the poor. Political overtones are skilfully filtered into the plot. Is it coincidence that two of the leading figures in what amounts to a secret society within society bear the names of past presidents—Dr Cleveland and Judge Carter? And that apropos nothing, our iconoclastic hero's best friend says in an early scene, 'You may be someone who grows up to shoot the president'? Throughout the film there is a powerful suggestion that Capitol Hill is, as it were, occupied territory.

Ted Ferguson, the archetypal yuppie, whose party everybody would give his eye teeth to attend, is singled out for 'an internship in Washington'. When he is unable to take up the appointment by virtue of a mishap that turns him inside

out, we are left in no doubt that there will be others to take his place. 'It looks as if I shall have an opening in Washington next summer,' the judge says, 'know what I mean?' Of course, we don't know exactly what he means, but this sinister *envoi* sets us wondering just how high the corruption goes. Odd, isn't it, that all American presidents are wealthy and that the system, with expensive primaries to fight, militates against a man of the people assuming the highest power.

Yuzna's super-rich derive their power from 'shunting' people. An intriguing word, halfway between a shaft and a hunt, it amounts to a systematic devouring of the victims by sucking out their vital organs. It provides a field day for the special-effects team under the appropriately named Screaming Mad George. This is even more disturbing than the hints that society as we know it is not what it seems and that anybody who stumbles on the truth will be branded paranoid. Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* rests on a similar premise. Try telling the world that there is a secret society behind what we take to be reality, and you, too, would be labelled paranoid, even if it were true.

So far, none of the talents responsible for this outrageous comedy has been able to repeat its success. Yuzna, who had acted as producer on three horror films before *Society*, including the H.P. Lovecraft adaptation *Reanimator*, was one of the scriptwriters on the Disney picture *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and directed *Reanimator 2*, for which Keith and Fry also wrote the script. But the result is straight schlock-horror—everything that *Society* was able to transcend. The jury is still out on Brian Yuzna.

Bob Balaban, director of *Parents*, is better known as an actor. He played supporting roles in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Altered States* and *Prince of the City*. As a director, he also made several well-received shorts, but nothing prepared the way for a film as original as *Parents*. Randy Quaid and Mary Beth Hurt play parents so wholesome that they're like walking advertisements for the American Way of Life. He is tall, brawny and a big meat-eater; she is slightly daffy, but a slave to her kitchen, as every little woman was once thought to be. In America in the late 1950s, they would have been considered model parents.

But although the film is set more than 30 years ago, we view it from the perspective of the 1990s. And what is it that dad does for a living? He develops chemicals for a company called Toxico and, a generation later, would be the Green Party's bugaboo. At table, his tastes run to red meat and offal—the building blocks of every macho American—but he replenishes the larder from the morgue.

As in *Society*, however, the next generation stubbornly refuses to 'fit in'. In class, the couple's son, a newcomer who has joined the school from his previous home in Massachusetts, is asked to tell the class something new. He reveals that if you cook a cat on the broiler, peel off the skin and chew the bones, you will become invisible. Which is not quite the kind of information his teacher had in mind.

From society's point of view, the trouble with junior (Bryan Madorsky) is that he just won't fit in. Unlike the other children in the class, his painting of his parents is like something out of a nightmare by H.R. Giger. Clear evidence, the authorities conclude, of mental abnormality, and they call in social worker Sandy Dennis to sort him out. But she is more neurotic than he, frantically scrabbling after a last cigarette, and inevitably earmarked for supper when she starts to believe the boy's story. Balaban handles the murder of Sandy Dennis with style. The murder weapon is a golf club, status symbol of the rising professional class. As it swings towards the camera, Balaban fades out rapidly and then fades in on a barbecue in the backyard. Shall we ever eat rump steak again?

Society and *Parents* are horror pictures pointing to new directions for a genre that in the late 1980s had grown stale and repetitive. *Heathers*, though it bears some relation to the teenage movies of John Hughes, *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, is pretty much sui generis. For one thing, it devises a language for its high-school characters as inventive and ribald as anything since Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Much of it is unprintable, but 'how very' is a term of contempt, 'What's your damage?' a sign of impatience, 'pretty severe' a mark of admiration and 'Maybe we should cough up a phlegm glob' the ultimate insult. Twice in the film, and shot in the same way, 16-year-old Winona Ryder sits down on the patio with her parents, nibbles something on toast and announces solemnly, 'Great pâté, but I've got to motor if I want to be ready for that party [funeral].' It's dialogue

(Top) ***Society*****: Pamela Matheson; (left)** ***Heathers*****: Winona Ryder; (below)** ***Parents*****: Mary Beth Hurt, Randy Quaid.**

that seems to be English, but it's as if the words have taken on a life of their own.

Heathers, like *Society*, is about an organisation that runs the world behind its back. It's made up of the three girls all named Heather and one honorary member, Veronica Sawyer (Winona Ryder). They are the arbiters of who and what is acceptable and beautiful, sending Martha 'Dumptruck' Dunnstock to Coventry because she is obese. Veronica and Jack Nicholson-actalike J.D. (Christian Slater) decide that since the lead Heather is a pain, they will help her on her way to the next world with a loving cup of disinfectant, covering up the crime with a forged suicide note. But the taste for murder once learnt is not easily forgotten, and before long they are cutting a swath through the school, disguising the killing of two football jocks as a suicide pact between consenting adults.

Popularity and being up-to-the-minute are *de rigueur* in Westerburg High. 'Grow up, Heather,' says one Heather to another, 'you're so '87.' Young Veronica has no illusions about why any of them are at school—not to learn certainly: 'Our job is being popular and shit.' And one way of being popular is having all the latest consumer goods. Heather Chandler, the first of the girls to be murdered, crashes through an elegant glass table on the way to the ground after drinking the poisoned chalice. She kept in her locker a copy of the Barbara Kruger postcard 'I shop, therefore I am'.

Though the film has been criticised for advocating teenage suicide, there is in fact only one true suicide attempt, when Martha Dumptruck tries to walk under a lorry with a farewell-cruel-world note pinned to her chest. Characteristically, it is handled not as a tragedy but as another excuse for bad taste. 'It's just another case', says one of the surviving Heathers, 'of a geek trying to imitate the popular people of the school and failing miserably.'

Perhaps the funniest scene is the 'funeral' of the second Heather. To accompany her death, the 'killers' have underlined relevant passages in *Moby Dick*, including references to the Eskimos. The parson picks up the analogy and in the address says, 'Let's hope she's rubbing noses with Jesus.' The scene is in fact imaginary, so Michael Lehmann underlines the artificiality by having all the funeral party wear designer sunglasses. And Heather Chandler puts in an appearance in weeds, complaining that the afterlife is insufferably boring and that she will scream if she has to sing 'Kumbaya' one more time.

At the end, *Heathers* grows apocalyptic when J.D. resolves to blow up the school. Like father, like son. His father, after all, is a demolition expert, who blew up his wife when she entered a doomed building seconds before he plunged the detonator. Destruction plainly runs in the family. 'People are going to look at the ashes of Westerburg', he declares, 'and say there was a school that self-destructed, not because society didn't care, but because the school was society.' Like *Parents* and *Society* itself, *Heathers* is an indictment of the way we live now.

Director Michael Lehmann, 33 last year, read philosophy at Berkeley, Columbia and the University of Tübingen before becoming a gofer at Francis Coppola's Zoetrope studio. His student film, *Beaver Gets a Boner*, impressed the top brass at New World Pictures and led to *Heathers*, for which Daniel Waters' initial 200-page script had to be reduced to manageable proportions. Since *Heathers*, Lehmann has made *Meet the Applegates*, about a colony of insects who masquerade as Americans in order to blow up a nuclear plant.

More recently, he has been working on *Hudson Hawk*, a big-budget Bruce Willis picture scheduled for summer release in 1991. *Heathers* cost only $3m and it remains to be seen how far Lehmann will be able to preserve his individuality in the context of a mega-buck movie. But he has been sounding the right notes. When told that there were some subjects he could not be funny about, he asked for a list—'because those are the things I want to be funny about next time'.

-ALAN STANBROOK-

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JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

CRITICISM ON FILM

The Palm Beach Story: Sturges and Company.

It's no secret that serious film criticism in print has become an increasingly scarce commodity, while 'entertainment news', bite-size reviewing and other forms of promotion in the media have been steadily expanding. (I'm not including academic film criticism, a burgeoning if relatively sealed-off field which has developed a rhetoric and tradition of its own—the principal focus of David Bordwell's fascinating recent book, *Making Meaning*.) But the existence of serious film commentary *on* film, while seldom discussed as an autonomous entity, has been steadily growing, and in some cases supplanting the sort of work which used to appear only in print.

I am not thinking of the countless talking-head 'documentaries' about current features—actually extended promos financed by the studios or production companies—which include even such a relatively distinguished example as Chris Marker's *AK* (1985), about the making of Kurosawa's *Ran*. The problem with these efforts is that they further blur the distinction between advertising and criticism, and thus make it even harder for ordinary viewers to determine whether they are being informed about something or simply being sold a bill of goods. What I have in mind are films about films and filmmakers which seriously analyse or document their subjects. Many of these films surface at festivals, turn up on TV, and are used in academic courses, but very few ever wind up in commercial theatres, and so are rarely reviewed outside the trade journals. I can't claim to be comprehensive in this survey, so what follows is merely meant to be suggestive, and mainly weighted towards what I've seen recently.

A few words about the conventions of this sub-genre. Most films about the work of a film-maker have a standard itinerary: a show-and-tell format, consisting of interviews (with the filmmaker and friends, associates, biographers, critics), clips, and, if the subject is still alive, footage documenting work on a recent feature. The best

examples from the past include Peter Bogdanovich's *Directed by John Ford* (1971), Philo Bregstein's *Whoever Tells the Truth Shall Die* (on Pasolini, 1980), Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's *Unknown Chaplin* (1983) and Michael Ventura's *'I'm Almost Not Crazy': John Cassavetes, The Man and His Work* (1984).

Patrick Montgomery's *The Man You Loved to Hate* (1979), scripted by Richard Koszarski and intended as a companion to his Stroheim biography, illustrates the advantages and drawbacks of this approach. Clips from a good many rare films in which Stroheim acted are invaluable, and interviews with many people who knew Stroheim well give us a vivid sense of his personality; but the amount of concrete information imparted is minuscule compared with Koszarski's book. Production histories of each film whiz by so rapidly that we are ultimately left with much more about Stroheim's public profile than his directorial style. The commentary is certainly enlightened, but if we want any sense of how Stroheim's style evolved, we have to look elsewhere.

Much the same can be said of *Preston Sturges: The Rise and Fall of an American Dreamer* (1990), with the difference that here there is no satisfactory biography to fall back on—unless one counts the recently published *Preston Sturges*, skilfully edited and adapted by Sandy Sturges from her husband's unfinished autobiography, letters and diaries. We do, however, have Manny Farber and W. S. Poster's essay 'Preston Sturges: Success in the Movies' and Penelope Houston's Sturges entry in Richard Roud's *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, both of which contain critical insights which the film makes no attempt to approximate. Directed by Kenneth Bowser and written by the former *Variety* critic and reporter Todd McCarthy, the documentary competently lays out the basic facts and contradictions of Sturges' life and meteoric career; and

Signed: Lino Brocka.

it's notable for the variety of archive material it draws on, from radio interviews, through Sturges' cameo appearance in *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942), to photographs and verbal accounts of the gabmaster at work.

Two facets of Sturges' career are, however, regrettably glossed over: his extraordinary stock company of character actors and his last film. Andrew Sarris perceptively describes how these actors function in a typical Sturges scene, and the narration goes on to cite half-a-dozen names while subliminally quick close-ups from a group photograph flash by: William Demarest, Jimmy Conlin, Robert Warwick, Jack Norton, Robert Greig, Frank Moran. But given the Bruegelian richness of this aspect of Sturges' art, the list should have been much longer—at least a dozen major names are omitted, from Edgar Kennedy and Raymond Walburn to Lionel Stander and Akim Tamiroff—and a clip illustrating the choral function of these characters would not have been amiss.

Made in France in 1956 in separate French and English versions—*Les Carnets du Major Thompson* and *The French They Are a Funny Race/The Diary of Major Thompson*—Sturges' rare swan song is the only film he directed not to be accorded a clip. Apart from Pauline Kael's judicious short notice in *5001 Nights at the Movies*, almost every critical reference to the film in print writes it off as dreadful, and this documentary clearly concurs by so hastily gliding past it. Having seen the English version, however, I beg to differ. While it is far from a masterpiece, the film has sweetness, gallantry, wit and an uncharacteristic leisurely pace that is elegiac rather than inert. (If there is a dreadful film in the Sturges canon—and I am afraid there is—it's *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*.)

These cavils aside, the picture is a good example of what the conventional show-and-tell format can accomplish. The same is true of Paul Joyce's *Motion and Emotion: The Films of Wim Wenders* (1989), though here the film's principal value is as a work of criticism. This is a rare virtue in American show-and-tell documentaries, which usually try to hide their critical biases—as the Sturges documentary does with its disdain for the director's last film. *Motion and Emotion*, on the other hand, conveys a sense of what is both questionable and praiseworthy about Wenders' work. Without being malicious or polemical, it also offers the best ideological critique of Wenders I have encountered: much of this comes from the critic Kraft Wetzel who remarks, during a fascinating discussion touching on the director's use of women and children, that Wenders will be remembered as the Christian Democrat of the New German Cinema. As a detailed investigation of a major contemporary film-maker, this documentary strikes me as a more valuable overall appraisal than any book or article I have read on the director, even providing the basis for a critique-in-advance, as it were, of Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*.

Christian Blackwood's *Signed: Lino Brocka* focuses more on its subject's life than on his films; considering Brocka's career, however, this approach seems sensible. (It worked less well when applied to Raul Ruiz in Jill Evans' *Exiles* series on Channel 4; there the emphasis on how nice a fellow Ruiz was didn't leave much space for dealing with the more subversive aspects of his work.) The film opens with shots of Manila, while we hear Brocka speaking on the phone in English to someone in France. He tells Blackwood he is responding to a French survey about why he makes films; then he reads his reply, a lengthy statement which concludes, 'Film for me recaptures the spontaneous, pure, nonsensical relationship I had with the world as a child. This is why later, when I learned what was happening to my countrymen, I decided I also wanted to be part of those who tell the truth—I wanted to cry and I wanted to disturb . . . signed, Lino Brocka.'

Cut to a shot of Brocka directing. The movie-in-progress, we learn, is being made as a favour to a producer who paid

The Man You Loved to Hate.

Brocka's bail bond when he was arrested for acting as a negotiator in a 1985 jitney transit strike. Brocka goes on to describe his difficult childhood, his varied background (including work as a monk in a Hawaiian leper colony), his developing relationship to his homosexuality, the local film industry, his hatred for Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, and his growing activism. What impresses one most through this extended illustrated conversation with Blackwood is the courage and intelligence of Brocka's candour. When clips from his films are shown—shot directly from a screen or movieola—Brocka translates the dialogue, explains the plots and offers some self-critical asides to Blackwood. The documentary assumes, as well as demonstrates, a continuity between Brocka's passion as a director and his passion as a human being, and while Brocka speaking cannot wholly take the place of seeing a Brocka film, it provides an absorbing introduction.

The French emphasis on style and form has on occasion breathed new life into the standard show-and-tell format, notably in André Labarthe and Janine Bazin's TV series *Cinéastes de notre temps*, which has been appearing since the 60s and which often imitates the shooting and editing styles of the directors interviewed. Thus, Josef von Sternberg was accorded Sternbergian lighting while he spoke about *The Saga of Anatahan*; Samuel Fuller's anecdotes and two-fisted aphorisms were punctuated with staccato editing; and Cassavetes was filmed around the time of *Faces* (by Labarthe and Hubert Knapp) with a hand-held camera in his own home and environs.

One sometimes regrets the absence of any impulse to contextualise the directors' remarks in a more critical light. Like most of Sternberg's critics, Labarthe seems to accept at face value the director's insistence that apart from the sea everything in *Anatahan* is artificial and created for the camera. But what of the key archive sequence of Japanese soldiers returning after the war? Without the dialectical power of this documentary intrusion—particularly in relation to the abstract homecoming sequence—the greatness of *Anatahan* would be substantially diminished. More recently, in *Cinéma de notre temps*, a successor to *Cinéastes...*, David Lynch is filmed by Guy Girard at his home, dictating a script to a secretary while the camera drifts dreamily into the next room to pick up a slanted view of *Eraserhead* on a TV set before gliding back to Lynch again. Thanks partly to the questions offered, this is a sharper portrait of Lynch than the usual promos, but it is still some distance from a genuine critical overview.

Labarthe has recently applied similar tactics to a semi-fictional feature in English about the last days of Orson Welles—called *The Big O* in English, and *L'Homme qui a vu l'homme qui a vu l'ours* in French—and in several ways this uneven work summarises the achievements and pitfalls in the sort of mimetic journalism which has engaged Labarthe over several decades.

Described as a 'fictional essay', *The Big O* resurrects the fictional Laszlo Kovacs—an alias of Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless*, reprised by Belmondo in modified form in Chabrol's *A Double Tour*—played here by New Wave bit actor (and post-New Wave director) Laszlo Szabo, serving as Labarthe's virtual stand-in. Trying to launch a feature of his own in Los Angeles, Kovacs becomes obsessed with investigating what Welles was up to before he died. With the aid of friends, he improbably arranges a series of interviews with former associates and acquaintances of Welles, most of them conducted in Szabo's heavily accented English (although John Houseman, filmed shortly before his own death, speaks in French). Eventually, Kovacs moves to New York and Paris for further revelations and metaphysical speculations.

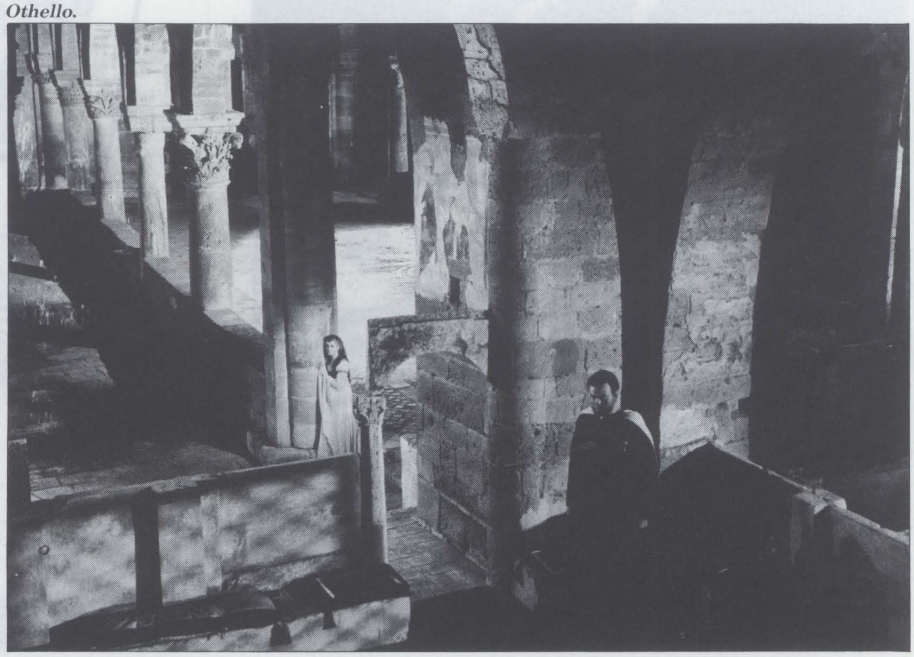
Although the film improves as it proceeds, it is limited by a perverse capriciousness in terms of style and scholarship: a plethora of tilted angles, dominating the first half, conveys only a superficial notion of Welles' mutable style (although later the film becomes more subtle when it imitates the lighting scheme of the Orly sequence of *F for Fake*); and the treatment of Welles as a mythic father figure, the subject of an oedipal search, oscillates uneasily between genuine investigation and a refusal to sort out truth and legend. Houseman's frequent claim that Welles never wrote a word of *Citizen Kane* has been definitively disproved, but you would never guess it here, where Houseman's repetition of this lie—refuted even in his own correspondence with Welles while *Kane* was in production—is permitted to go unchallenged.

By contrast, Henry Jaglom's assertion that he openly taped many of his conversations with Welles at the latter's own request is refuted in detail by Welles' long-time associate Alessandro Tasca di Cuto, reportedly the last person to have seen Welles alive, who states that the taping, belatedly discovered by Welles, was done without his prior knowledge or consent. Labarthe is somewhat cavalier about distinguishing between authorities and braggarts; many of the participants, moreover, were interviewed without knowing that they were appearing in a semi-fictional work, so levels of deception come into play on both sides. What this adds up to may not be entirely satisfactory as either research or criticism, although as a tortured reflection on the lures and snares of French *cinéphilia*, it is often a pungent document.

Some of the most interesting documentaries adopt some or all of the show-and-tell format only to subvert it, and in ways that are more fruitful than Labarthe's. Orson Welles' *Filming Othello* (1978), a prime instance of this skulduggery, features clips from Welles' 1952 *Othello*, yet all but the first of these are substantially re-edited by Welles and shown silent while he offers commentary over them. While Welles never alludes to this procedure—except perhaps in an aside on 'quoting or misquoting' critical comments by Jack Jorgens and André Bazin—it has the provocative and unsettling effect of continually transforming the supposedly fixed object under examination. We are hearing about a film made in 1952, but what we are seeing is the scrambled shards of a dream of *Othello*, oddly akin to the dreamlike prologue of *Citizen Kane*, rather than the film itself.

Three academic studies of early cinema deserve attention. While some of the historical assertions in Noël Burch's *Correction, Please, or How We Got into Pictures* (1979) and *What Do Those Old Films Mean?* (1985) are open to debate, the use of fiction in the former film to illustrate theories about the evolution of film form between 1900 and 1906 is

Othello.



imaginative and inventive, and both works offer sustained looks at rare archive footage in near optimum conditions.

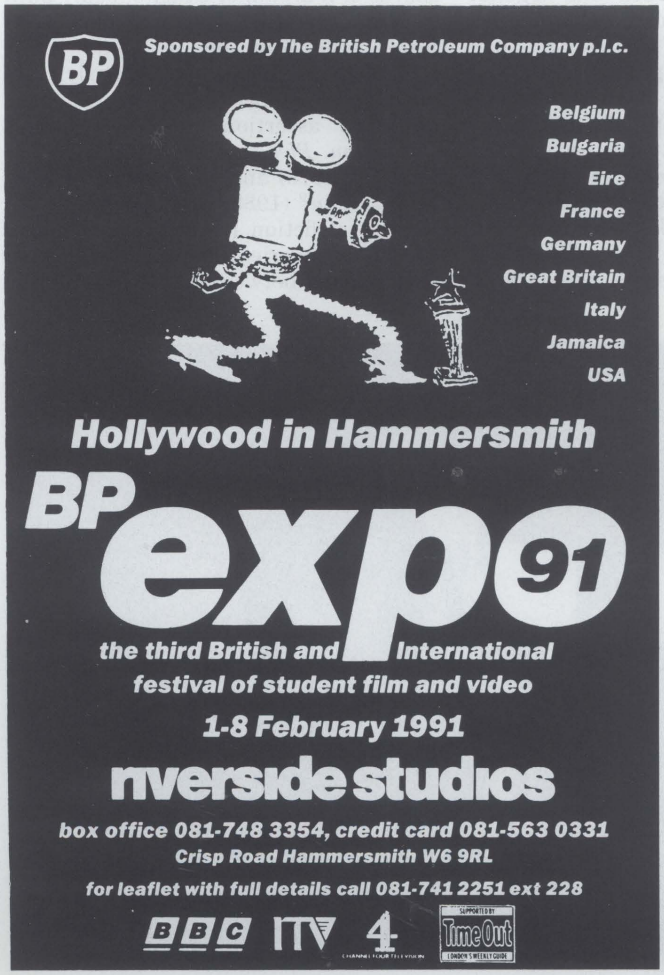
Thom Andersen's *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer* (1976), by contrast, seems unimpeachable both as history and film-making. Beginning with a quote from Mao and ending with allusions to Zeno and Da Vinci, it is remarkable for the amount of information it imparts in an hour, and for the economy with which it suggests the philosophical, sociological, scientific, aesthetic, optical, technical *and* theoretical implications of Muybridge's motion studies without belabouring any of them. Using split-screen effects to juxtapose simultaneously two or more angles and/or speeds in these studies, and even simulating one Muybridge study in colour, the film superimposes its own analytical grids over Muybridge's, and thus yields a complex historical meditation.

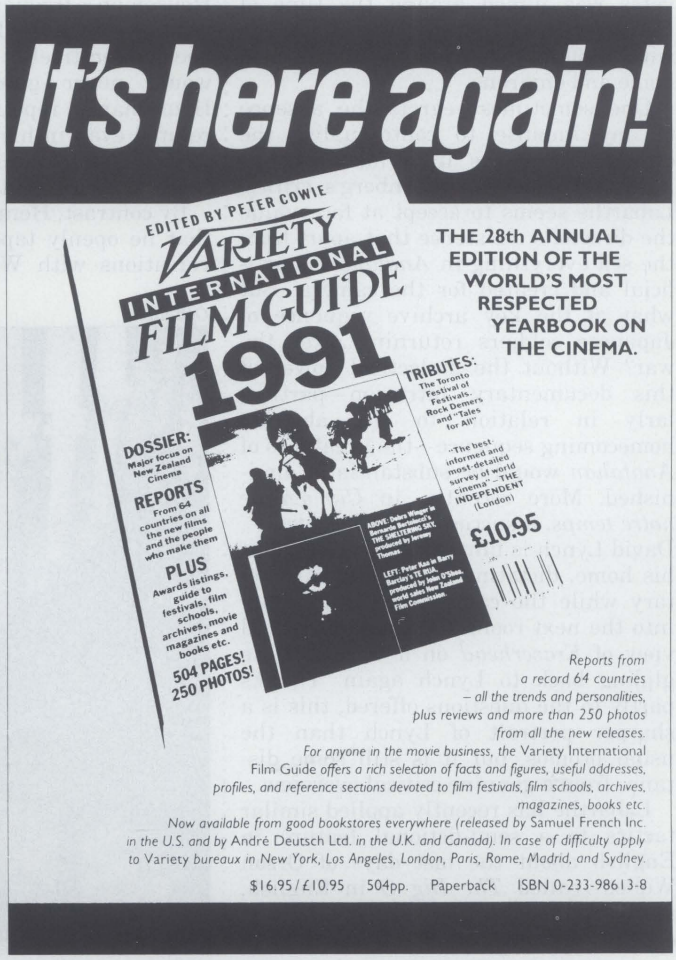
A more recent theoretical study is Godard's TV series *Histoire(s) de cinéma* (1988)—an extremely hermetic (if fascinating) work using dozens of clips, stills, printed titles and fragments of soundtracks, many of them simultaneously or in rapid alternation, along with his own fragmented commentary, to tease out various apparent relationships between film and history. Godard concocted this delirious exercise in associative collage at precisely the point where the *cinéphilia* that launched his own generation is nearing extinction, which means that most of his linkages are bound to be semi-comprehensible at best, even to specialists.

The printed title 'le cinéma substitue' ushers in alternating snatches of Murnau's *Faust* (Faust and Mephistopheles at the crossroads) and Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire dancing in a bar), accompanied by a few lines of dialogue (the narrator seducing the heroine) from *Last Year in Marienbad*. That the dance occurs inside a stage musical based on *Faust* may be apparent to some spectators, although not many of them are likely to recognise the Murnau clip or the *Marienbad* dialogue, much less make the Faustian connections. Even if they do, what are they (or we) then to make of the apparently unrelated, subliminal glimpses of films by Renoir and Mizoguchi which follow?

Local clusters are often witty, or at least until further clusters come along to interrupt or dissipate them: Howard Hughes is identified by the title *Only Angels Have Wings*, followed by shots of an airplane, Charles Foster Kane, the RKO logo, and then, through a kind of delirium of association, the arrival of the aviator in Paris at the beginning of *La Règle du jeu*. The old woman being burned as a witch in Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* is accompanied by Rita Hayworth singing 'Put the Blame on Mame' from *Gilda*. But when the latter linkage is then followed by old Borgen calling for his son Johannes in *Ordet*, thereby establishing a link with Dreyer which seems to cancel out the feminist wisecrack, one feels cast adrift in a private reverie. 'Let's say, for example, that the history of cinema is the history of all the films that have never been made,' Godard suggests, and promptly illustrates with evocations of Welles' *Don Quixote*, *Othello*, *Kane*, *Journey into Fear*, *It's All True* and *F for Fake*—only two of which qualify as unfinished, much less unmade.

Given the perpetual drift in and out of meaning, this on-going series might be regarded as Godard's *Finnegans Wake*. But half a century of scholarship has decoded or at least illuminated the meaning-clusters of Joyce, while it is difficult, alas, to foresee comparable efforts being made on behalf of Godard. There's something quixotic about this last-ditch effort to process the history of cinema through his fanciful and cryptic pronouncements—a kind of shorthand synthesis of (or desperate *aide mémoire* for) what we've already forgotten, or at best, like Godard himself, only half-remembered. In so far as all the films about films discussed here are efforts to retrieve or resurrect continuities of film history that the marketplace continues to rend asunder, Godard's desperate magpie assemblage—dedicated to Mary Meerson of the Cinémathèque Française—at least has the virtue of suggesting the range of what is being lost and squandered. ■





'Shut up and just do it!'

PATRICIA ROZEMA, DIRECTOR OF 'I'VE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING', TALKS TO PETER BRUNETTE

Somewhere in *The White Room*, the zany Zelda (Sheila McCarthy) cautions Norm (Maurice Godin), budding writer and the film's central character, that the short story he is writing simply won't work. 'You can't have a wimp in the middle of a story,' she says, 'guys won't identify and girls won't be attracted.' It is around this bracing bit of self-reflexivity that Patricia Rozema, the director who first found success with an unconventional female lead in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, builds her latest film.

If feminist film theory is correct, most movies encourage their audiences, men especially, to identify with an active male hero. Rozema daringly undercuts this possibility of identification by giving her film a soft, unthreatening male lead, precisely the kind of character that a woman unconcerned with the demands of conventional Hollywood film-making might invent. Norman, a hapless and harmless voyeur who has witnessed a terrible murder, aspires to protect the women around him, especially the mysterious older woman Jane (Kate Nelligan), but they are all, to a person, stronger than he is. The culmination comes in an unconventional sex scene in which the roles are neatly reversed: Jane, the more experienced older woman whose privacy Norman has intruded upon, is clothed, dominant, even brutal, while the man, for a change, is naked and vulnerable.

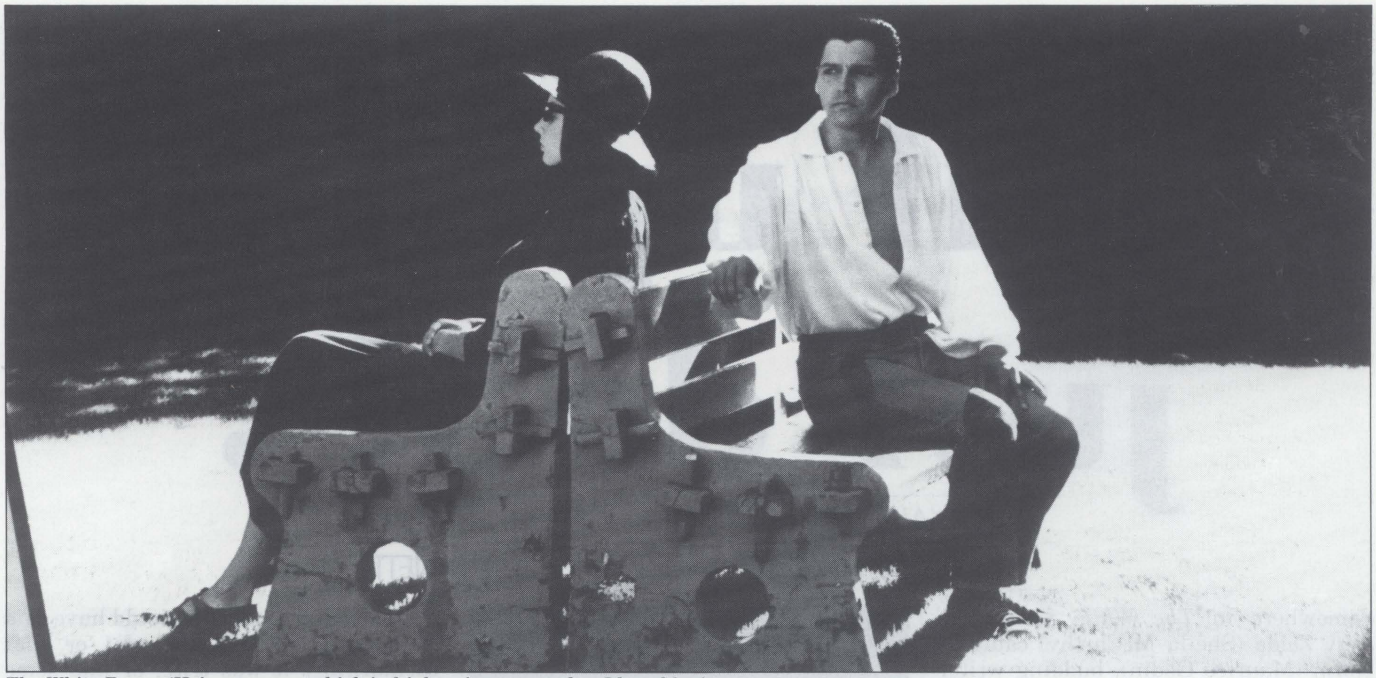
Some of the male critics present at the film's world premiere at the Toronto Festival of Festivals in September openly expressed their dismay. Rozema is understandably concerned about this, for while she clearly wants to be true to her artistic vision, she none the less knows that alienating half her potential audience (and some powerful male critics) will not be very healthy for her film. 'I was talking to a critic who told me straight out that he felt excluded as a male,' she said during a festival interview. 'He said that the only one he could identify with was the one being brutalised by the woman, and it made him feel so uneasy that he felt emasculated by it. I was totally shocked that he was so frank. I mean, he could have said that he didn't like the plot or that thematically it was trite, or find some other means rather than saying it threatened him sexually.'

***The White Room*:**
Sheila McCarthy, Maurice Godin.

Rozema insists that the film was not meant to be a 'revenge'. 'I'm not saying, okay, I'm going to show you how the reverse feels. That wasn't the motivation, because I couldn't do that and still love my main character. I have doubts about him all the way through—he's creepy at times, he's a voyeur, which is frightening to me—but I love him. I think he's just a deeply curious person; but he's an invader in spite of himself.' She admits that both Kate Nelligan and Maurice Godin were upset by the scene. 'Kate told me that it has none of the pain in it that she felt while she was doing it. I really do think it's a new sex scene, I really do. It's the least gratuitous sex scene I've ever seen. It could have been very stupid, but I think it works; and it's central to the film.'

Such innovative explorations of sexuality could hardly be further from the strict Dutch Calvinist home in Ontario in which Rozema grew up. College was an escape for her, and while studying philosophy and literature, she decided that what she really wanted to do was tell stories, so she got a job working as a summer intern for a local newspaper. Then she discovered television and began working on a Canadian news show, where she was responsible for covering the arts. 'It was like being the chaplain on a football team,' she says now. 'It was so minor-league, and I kept promoting stories that never got done. All the artists I was interested in were not the kind of rapid-fire talkers that you need for TV.'

Rozema next turned to film, and spent a full year writing screenplays. After six scripts were rejected, she got lucky on the seventh and was awarded a $10,000 grant. She managed to scrape together another $9,000 and made her first film, a half-hour 16mm short called *Passion*. 'It was a very intense, concentrated piece that had a very articulate, powerful, confident woman in the central part, and I was kind of frightened



The White Room: 'He's a voyeur, which is frightening to me—but I love him.'

by her when the movie was over. I thought, well, that was a successful career woman, and now I want to do something about an unsuccessful career woman, something very delicate, something lightly woven, as effortless-looking as possible, and that was *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*.' Luckily for Rozema, just as she finished her feature-length script, the Canadian government decided to begin promoting feature films. 'Canada has always been famous for its strong documentary tradition, but fiction has been really weak. I guess *Passion* looked pretty professional, and since $350,000 wasn't a lot of money to them, they gave it to me.'

What happened next—the Prix de la Jeunesse at Cannes for a first feature—has already become the stuff of legend, presumably inspiring countless film students everywhere. The first surprise came when *Mermaids* was selected for Cannes. 'I knew nothing about the Directors' Fortnight, and very little about the festival itself. I still said *Cans*. I look at that moment now and say, it was a *miracle* that happened there, a rare and strange event which will be with me the rest of my life. But at the time, I just kept telling myself to be calm, be calm. I felt a great big wave of approval, and for me it meant that I wasn't as alone in my tastes as I thought I was. Because when I made the film I very consciously tried not to think of market, audience, success or the future. It was great: the audience laughed at every conceivable funny line, and they cheered when Polly got her revenge. But there was some sadness in it for me too—how could I ever come out of the blue again?'

The film was sold to 35 countries within four days, and ended up making a great deal more than the $350,000 it had cost. 'That figure became oppressive to other film-makers around me, because people were saying, "Look, Patricia can make a film for only $350,000 and it makes a lot of money, how come you want a million?"—which of course is just a normal amount for an extremely low budget film. The only reason my film cost so little is that I found locations on my bicycle and we had no office—we worked out of my apartment and the producer's apartment. I wrote it and edited it, and only made $9,000 off the thing. And you can't have an industry survive like that.' Getting money from the Canadian government for the next one was easy. 'But somehow it felt like less of an achievement, since I felt that they would have given money for any script that I gave them.'

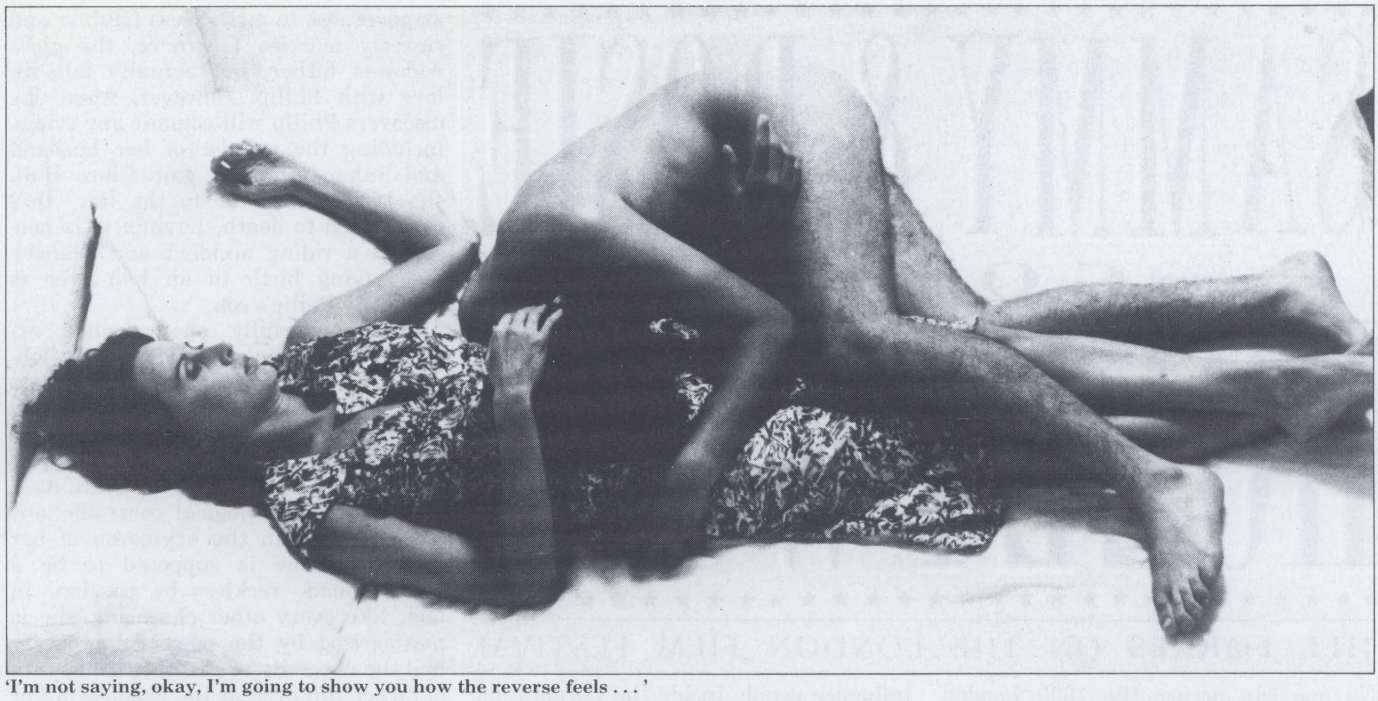
I've Heard the Mermaids Singing will never be considered a landmark in world cinema history, but it signalled a fresh, new perspective, something the film world always seems to find irresistible. For Rozema, the film is 'an exploration of the huge and impressive internal world of a very small and unimpressive external life. On one level, Polly is someone who falls in love with the older woman she calls the "curator", but she says she doesn't want the kissing and all that. On another level, a level that I sometimes resisted, it was a kind of allegorical story about an individual confronting authority—in this case artistic authority, which is similar to the religious authority of my own background—and realising that there are no absolutes. I think what drew people to it, though, was not this aspect, but because I was so spontaneous and un-selfconscious in the making of it. Just a bunch of friends with a camera.'

Mermaids itself, like *The White Room*, is about the dangers of looking and being involved in other people's lives. In the earlier film, however, the one looking at the women on her video screen is Polly, another woman. As one American feminist critic has pointed out, here women are defined vis-à-vis each other, not by men, and since both subject and object are female, the film's vision is necessarily feminist. 'I know a lot of women who like *Mermaids*,' says Rozema, 'and I'm protected from men who don't like it. Fortunately, because I can't handle criticism at all. But it's true: it's definitely a female sensibility, and women recognise and respond to it, no question.

'But what's so unusual about that? Men tend to write male characters better, and women often don't find themselves in those movies. They're the admirers, the cheerleaders, the prize for heroic acts. I find that when I write a female character who has any kind of complexity or depth or unusual conflicts, the actresses come flocking, because there are so few characters like that around. That's why *The White Room* is an experiment for me. I tried to live through, to slip inside the soul of a male, and it was kind of an uneasy fit for me.

'The white room itself is probably an entirely feminine image, a secret place where you keep your most valuable treasure. I had this idea of an inner space that was tranquil and sacred—probably a pretty feminine image: I'm sure it has a biological basis—and this young man, for whom I have total sympathy, wants in. He wants in on an artistic level, and on a basic personal and sexual level. But in his case, getting in is a disruption.'

The film's central paradox concerns the tension between the need for privacy, which is isolating, and the need for contact, which makes you vulnerable. 'The only worthwhile work is going to come from that space, but the only time you are ever allowed to be loved is if you invite someone into that space. *Mermaids* was whimsical and delicate, so I wanted this film to be more cruel and sober. Although I say sober, I've got all these colours and all this music, and it's done in a kind of high style, but I didn't go for the emotional wallop at all. I'm pleased with this strange juxtaposition. I think *The White Room* is marked by its sobriety, but stylistically it's very



'I'm not saying, okay, I'm going to show you how the reverse feels . . . '

euphoric and swirling. I wanted the euphoria!'

Despite the gender questions raised in her films, Rozema does not think of herself as a feminist director. 'I'm a feminist, but I would want to distance myself from a certain brand of feminism that frightens me, the brand which seems to imply that there is less evil in the hearts of women. That's just absurd. Opportunity hasn't been equal—for property ownership, education, access to being recorded in history, choices over your life and control over your own reproductive system. But this has all changed so radically that I've never felt discriminated against.

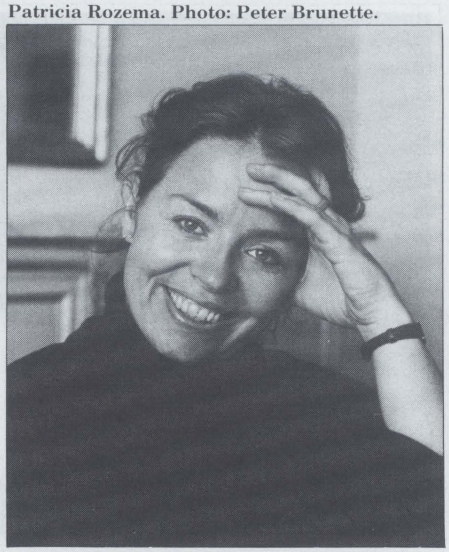
'I've never felt that my lack of a penis ever hurt me in my career. If anything, it set me apart; I'm more of a novelty act. But I don't think any artist worth her salt is a polemicist. I can be political outside of my work, and there can be things that seep into my work; but in my fiction, for me to consciously promote a course of action in terms of gender politics would weaken it. I think I'm trying to present a Patricia Rozema perspective on things, a completely individual perspective rather than a "feminist" one. It seems that when I do this, women tend to respond, but gender is a category that doesn't interest me. I think we're much more affected by our educational or geographical origins than by whether we're male or female.'

Like *Mermaids*, the new film is filled with powerful visual images that are not always very clearly connected to the narrative. 'I'm very image-oriented, and sometimes I resent it that I have to have a story, but I know I do. This was another reason for having the sex scene as the climax: the climax is the climax of the movie, and the resolution is what comes after. I believe that narrative structure is very similar to our organic experience, our sexuality: you know . . . introduction of characters, rising action, culmination, and then denouement. This is why we love to hear stories over and over again, with the same kind of peak of conflict and resolution that's related to our biological natures.'

Rozema hopes to be more 'smart-assed' in her next film. 'It's about a female detective who is completely bummed out because she's been hired by scum to follow scum and she thought there was going to be all this mystery. Then she meets another detective, of a very strange sort that I don't want to give away, who teaches her what mystery there is in common everyday life. It involves . . . well, not exactly space travel, but travel between dimensions. Once again it's about our relation to fiction—I think I'll always come back to that. Why do we tell ourselves these same stories over and over again? Religions are the same kind of fairy tales, with the ultimate happy ending. It's just to convince ourselves, at least for the moment, that it's all worth it.'

Given her predilection for the offbeat and the deeply personal, it is difficult to imagine Rozema being chased by Hollywood. Refreshingly, she doesn't seem to care in the slightest. 'I'm not in it for popularity. I'd like to make back the money a film costs, but if I have to make it on a smaller budget—I want to do a story, say, about two old people dying of skin disease—then I'll make it for a really small budget because I know it's not going to sell. But I have a side of me that's very populist.

Patricia Rozema. Photo: Peter Brunette.



'I'm not one of those people who say that the fewer seats you sell, the more important the film. Yes, American cinema has a sense of spectacle and a lot of energy and it's very efficient, but most studio films don't allow more than one thing to be happening at once. Whereas many European directors ignore the basic human need for continually having new information. So I'd love to make films that resonate on many levels at once, but that are also exciting. The mainstream films that surround us today merely reinforce the culture's dominant beliefs. They're now telling us family, family, family, country, country, country, fidelity, children—all films that would have died ten years ago. I am about to make a movie that says the right wing is the greatest danger to culture. The bad guy in my detective story is the right wing, the kind of people who believe in the nuclear family and so on.'

However *The White Room* is received, one senses that the effect on Rozema's determination will be small. 'I have the perhaps naive belief that if I'm sincere and if I work hard enough, my voice will be heard. If it became clear that many men were resisting *The White Room* because they felt uncomfortable with the male character or with the sex scene, and they were killing the film because of that, I think I still wouldn't complain publicly. Because when women say, "Well, I'd be much further ahead if I were a man," I dismiss them and say shut up and work twice as hard. The strongest feminist statement is to do it, and the strongest advice I can give any woman is to shut up about any difficulties over being a woman and just do it.' ■

SAMMY & ROSIE GO TO HOLLYWOOD

JILL FORBES ON THE LONDON FILM FESTIVAL

No one can accuse the 1990 London Film Festival—or its director, Sheila Whitaker—of failing to respond to public demand. The opening and closing galas, Bogdanovich's *Texasville* and Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky*, usefully combine art and commerce, America and Europe, the safe and the (mildly) experimental. Add to these *The Grifters*, which is made by a Brit (even if he has abandoned us for Hollywood), and *Henry & June*, Philip Kaufman's sanitised view of naughty Paris between the wars, and you have nicely taken care of the Festival on the Square end of things, the black ties, canapés and royalty.

The real festival is surely elsewhere. For better or worse, and often the latter, it is a showcase for British cinema which isn't much to do with Stephen Frears going to Hollywood, still less about David Puttnam talking to Michael Winner (as he did on 19 November). The last decade has been characterised by the massive entry of British television into film production, first with Channel 4 and then, more recently, the BBC. The Channel is present with Adam Kossoff's *Turbulence* and Dan Weldon's *My Macondo*, and indirectly through directors it has promoted in the past, such as Derek Jarman (*The Garden*) and Karl Francis (*Morphine and Dolly Mixtures*).

It's clear, however, that the BBC has become the significant player on this stage, with the advantage that it can guarantee a flow of production and the disadvantage that the social conscience dies hard. When one considers the pace of social transformation today, the thematic continuity of BBC production becomes truly remarkable. Thus we have juvenile delinquency in *Juvenile Liaison 2* (sic), the Afro-Caribbean community in *Hallelujah Anyhow* and Scottish unemployment in *Dreaming*, together with films by and/or about such stalwarts as Alan Bennett and Yehudi Menuhin. It is tempting to conclude that the way to make friends and influence people inside the Corporation is to ensure your film is set in the 'regions' among a 'minority', and that, whether or not it is a fiction, it addresses a social issue.

There's no way of telling if filmmakers, given half a chance, would choose different subjects. But the festival does offer a fascinating glimpse of why the BBC thought it should interpret its social responsibility in this highly idiosyncratic fashion. This is to be found in one of the National Film Archive restorations that have become such a feature of recent festivals: not the three Michael Powell films which are far too quirky to serve this purpose, but Marc Allégret's *Blanche Fury*, made in 1947 and presented as a rich example of design and Technicolor photography.

The plot, apparently based on a Victorian *cause célèbre*, concerns the illegitimate Philip Thorn (Stewart Granger) who feels himself dispossessed of his inheritance, Clare Hall, by the Fuller family who acquired the estate from Adam Fury in the absence of a legitimate male heir. The Fullers' poor cousin Blanche (Valerie Hobson) arrives as governess to motherless Lavinia and cleverly marries Lawrence, the girl's widowed father, but actually falls in love with Philip. However, when she discovers Philip will commit any crime, including the murder of her husband and father-in-law, to gain Clare Hall, she turns him over to the law. He's condemned to death, Lavinia kills herself in a riding accident and Blanche dies giving birth to an heir who is naturally Philip's son.

The wonderfully photographed exteriors cannot make up for Valerie Hobson's wooden performance. The part cries out for Margaret Lockwood, and the plot would have been much improved had *she* conspired, with or without Granger, to inherit Clare Hall. As it is, the film's ideological contradictions are embodied in the oxymoron of her name. Blanche is supposed to be a woman made reckless by passion. In fact, like every other character, she is mesmerised by the power of property and the necessity of ensuring continuity of ownership even at the expense of her own well-being. If this was representative of the British film industry in 1947, that year of social revolution, then one understands the BBC's desire to show the other face of Britain.

It has to be said, though, that the tendency to treat the non-metropolitan, non-middle class, non-white as problematical derives from residual class and race prejudice of an institutional kind which you just don't find in America. There the independent cinema makes a point of celebrating differences and promoting alternative cultures. Raul Ruiz, who used to devote much of his time to taking apart the French in such films as *Petit Manuel d'Histoire de France*, has turned his mordant gaze on the American dream in *The Golden Boat*, which combines those two essential items of American culture, New York violence and the soap opera.

The myths still remain, however, and the melting pot keeps bubbling up on screen in the portraits of Asian-Americans by Wayne Wang (*Life Is Cheap . . . But Toilet Paper Is Expensive*) and Arthur Dong (*Forbidden City USA*); or, most impressively, in Marlon

T. Riggs' *Tongues Untied*. This is a much better film than its director would have us believe. To be sure, its subject might be considered 'how we deal with issues of sexuality, race, gender, class, political consciousness and responsibility'. Black gay Americans may be exercised to decide whether they are more one or the other. The film, however, celebrates the specificities of black gay (male) culture.

Riggs takes black singers, actors and performers of all kinds and intercuts snatches of their poetry with shots of encounters between black gay men, mixing video footage, freeze frames and location-shot scenes with voice-over commentary, interior monologue and performances. The film has an extraordinary rhythm determined by the 'snap', analogous to the rap, the action of rhythmically snapping one's fingers in order both to make music and to show the straight world what one thinks of it, and to suggest how, for black gay men, things sometimes get too much for them and they 'snap'.

The London Film Festival has a long tradition of cultural exploration which began, many years ago, with Indian cinema and continued in 1990 with Hong Kong. But the great unknown of the past twelve months is Soviet and East European cinema, unofficially represented here by *The Ear* and *Taxi Blues*. Released after a 20-year ban, Karel Kachyna's *The Ear* turns out to be a brilliant investigation of public and private paranoia, the disintegration of the state and a disintegrating marriage, and it is precisely the exploration of the shifting borders between public and private life which gives the film its subtlety.

Taxi Blues, directed by Pavel Lounguine, is a product of *glasnost*, a Franco-Soviet production set in contemporary Moscow, which is depicted warts and all. Given the number of White Russian taxi drivers in Paris after the Revolution and the fact that taxi drivers are, by some sweet revenge, the biggest dollar earners in Moscow today, the film's title is probably intended as a modern joke. But the story is traditional—a victim's fascination with his persecutor: a saxophonist runs off without paying his taxi fare but is caught by the driver, who not only confiscates his instrument (which he tries, unsuccessfully, to sell), but also makes him wash his cab and perform other menial tasks.

In addition, the musician is Jewish, while the taxi driver, a fitness freak, emphasises his peasant origins. The film thus exposes the time-honoured conflict between the artist/parasite and the labourer in terms of overt anti-semitism. The saxophonist is rescued by the arrival of an American musician, who carries him off to the States to make a record which ensures his lionisation when he returns to Moscow. The taxi driver, meanwhile, returns to his grim flat, his interfering neighbours and his muscle-building. This is in every way a depressing picture of the Soviet Union, where having fun consists of getting as drunk as possible, removing your clothes in the street and smashing-up the neighbour's flat.

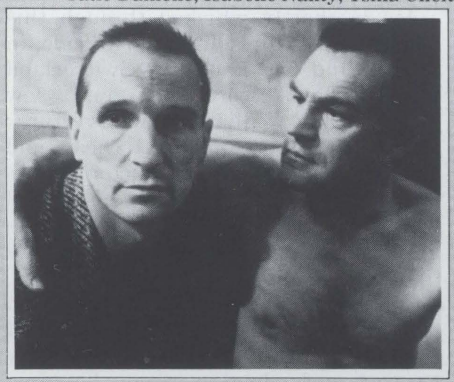
On the other hand, *Taxi Blues* testifies to the vitality and imagination of the French film industry. It is produced by Marin Karmitz, whose MK2 company specialises in low- and, now, medium-budget art films. Karmitz's unerring eye for talent and niche marketing has enabled him, over fifteen years, to become a significant influence and to ensure that, despite television and the inexorable process of internationalisation, French cinema has, more than most, conserved its national cultural identity. Indeed, Karmitz's success should give food for thought to David Puttnam and all other British producers whose cheque books are made out in dollars rather than pounds. If you can't please your domestic market, it is surely unlikely that you will attract anyone else.

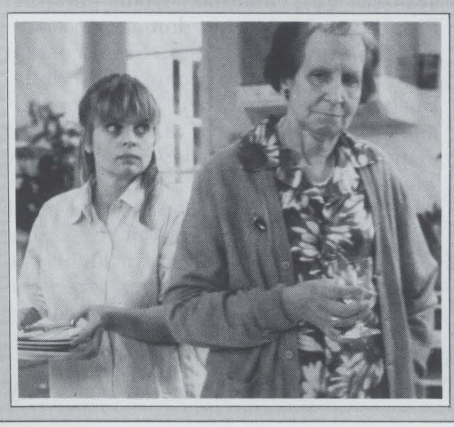
One Karmitz discovery was Claire Denis, whose first feature, *Chocolat*, he financed a couple of years ago. She returned to the festival with *S'en Fout la Mort*, a tale of two black men, one African, the other Caribbean, who work as long-distance lorry drivers in France and who are persuaded by a shady impresario (Jean-Claude Brialy) to import birds for illegal cock-fights. This is a film red in tooth and claw, featuring another arresting performance by Isaac de Bankolé, who played the 'boy' in *Chocolat* and who has had a distinguished stage career in France. *S'en Fout la Mort* lacks the broad canvas of *Chocolat*, but it confirms Denis as a superb director of actors and as a filmmaker with an intriguingly oblique view of the Western world.

Other French films seem to have a distinctly melancholy, not to say morbid streak. *These Foolish Things* has Dirk Bogarde playing a version of his autobiographical self and Jane Birkin as his slightly winsome daughter in a story about old age and death: themes not new to the director Bertrand Tavernier, but pursued here with no respite at a positively agonising slow pace. Old age is less favourably treated in Etienne Chatiliez's second feature, *Tatie Danielle*, starring a shameless old lady who mercilessly exploits her relations, until one day she receives her comeuppance from the girl employed to look after her while the family is away. It's a whole lot better than *On Golden Pond*, *Driving Miss Daisy* or any of the other recent American senior-citizen movies, but still not a patch on René Allio's classic *La Vieille Dame Indigne*. My favourite film of the bunch is Nicole Garcia's one from the heart, *Un Week-end sur Deux*, in which Nathalie Baye—never better—plays a mother who sees her children on alternate weeks, is frankly terrible at looking after them, and feels guilty.

Making the most of the LFF has become a frustrating intellectual challenge: no one can possibly see everything on offer and choice has become increasingly arbitrary. Since it cannot be a market like Cannes, and since it is no longer the only British outlet for foreign films, it has become a festival in search of a purpose. In recent years, the Archive re-releases have been among the most compelling works shown, and in future I should like to see full-scale retrospectives alongside the new works. Other festivals do this with success, why not London? ★

Left: ***S'en Fout la Mort*, Alex Descas. Centre: *Taxi Blues*, Piotr Mamonov and Piotr Zaitchenko; *Tatie Danielle*, Isabelle Nanty, Tsilla Chelton. Right: *Un Week-end sur Deux*, Nathalie Baye.**





ROGER CORMAN'S FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND

· RICHARD COMBS CHARTS A GUIDE TO THE GALAXY ·

1. THE ATOM, NEW & IMPROVED

By his beginnings will we know him. One of the pleasures of *Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound*, now that credit sequences are becoming so starkly informational, is that it begins with a sequence which encapsulates and abstracts its theme, and is also quite beautiful in its own right. A swirl of matter is soon identifiable as Promethean fire, the sun's flames in close-up; this then becomes incandescent matter of another kind, particles streaming in a void or floating in a primal jelly, as if the telescopic view had suddenly become a microscopic one.

In the credit sequences of Corman's 60s films, nothing was really identifiable, presumably because economy dictated that these vistas of cellular life spawning, replicating, mutating across the screen were handmade approximations. But the effects were striking: an obvious contagion a-borning in *The Masque of the Red Death*, and something more luxuriously, liquidly suggestive—blood, spermatozoa—in the colours squirting into each other for *Pit and the Pendulum*. The effect there was even slightly psychedelic, anticipating *The Trip*, a largely plotless film which was like a feature-length credit sequence.

The opening of *Frankenstein Unbound*, however, is the real thing, scientific film footage which, like the well-rounded, classically ominous score by Carl Davis, announces that this is not the cheap and cheerful context of the Corman of old. For his return to directing after the twenty-year hiatus since *Von Richthofen and Brown*, the maker of two- and three-day wonders had the luxury of a ten-week schedule and a $9m budget on locations around Milan and Lake Como. But how much figurative realism, how much authentic scene-setting, can a Corman movie stand?

There is one curious trial scene, for instance, set in Geneva in 1817, in which a young girl is accused of having, with the aid of witchcraft, horribly dismembered the younger brother of Dr Victor Frankenstein (Raul Julia), whose own monster of course did the deed. The trial is observed by a time-tripping scientist from the twenty-first century, Dr Joe Buchanan (John Hurt), who casually joins the crowds flocking to the courtroom, Corman's happily mobile camera following him on a tour of the solid period setting (Bergamo Alta for Geneva) and its bustling inhabitants. But once the trial is under way, with its grumbling peasants and American-accented officials, we might well be in a more hastily stuck-together, and more playful, witchcraft and time-travel caper like *The Undead* (1956).

Frankenstein Unbound is certainly playful, from its outright jokes—at home in New Los Angeles, Joe Buchanan zips around in a computerised car with a bar code instead of a licence plate—to a plot which allows the foresighted Buchanan to discuss Mary Shelley's as yet unwritten *Frankenstein* with the author (Bridget Fonda), while Frankenstein and his creature are running around the woods in the flesh. One could not, in fact, ask for anything more in the way of a compleat Corman, beginning with the imperious figure of Joe Buchanan, tinkering with the way space and time are put together to suit his own designs. In 2031, he has invented a laser beam which can cause targets to implode, simply drop out of time, and this he demonstrates to the military ('Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the atom, new and improved') with the idea that now they'll be able to wage war without destroying the world. But his experiments have an unfortunate side effect, 'stratospheric disturbances' which are shaking the boundaries of this future perfect world, because when an object drops out of time, 'sometimes it leaves a door open'.

Dream meeting: John Hurt.

Joe is shortly whisked through this door, finding himself on a hillside in Switzerland (we know it's Switzerland because Davis' score gives out a few bars of the 'William Tell Overture': some effects here are still cheap and cheerful). He then meets Victor Frankenstein, who is intrigued by his digital watch and peppermint-flavoured envelopes ('We are brothers, doctor'), makes the acquaintance of Byron and Shelley, a fey pair who simper at each other and make jokes about sex and death, and tries unsuccessfully to save the wrongly accused girl, Justine, from hanging. Finally, to repair his damage to space and time, and to try to stop Frankenstein from committing a comparable folly, Buchanan collaborates in an experiment that shoots them all through time again. This lands them in a snowy waste, true to Mary Shelley, where, true to Corman, Buchanan is seen at the beginning and end of the film, 'either at the end of a world or the beginning of one', trudging after the monster, who represents 'the madness of possibility' (Mary's words here) unbound.

The Frankenstein theme so neatly

describes everything Corman has done—from such previously Promethean figures as Doctor Xavier and Prince Prospero, to the very way he made his films by stitching together other people's leftovers—that it's surprising he has not treated the character before. And *Frankenstein Unbound* is 'omnibus' enough to include many scenes of unreconstructed 60s Corman, from Buchanan's tinted dream sequences—bloody hands grope after the stumbling scientist, as he confronts a grinning, hooded figure with the question, 'Who is responsible for this?', and is told, 'Who do you think?'—to the drive-in sex and badly acted ingenue scenes with Mary Shelley ('Percy and Byron preach free love, I practise it,' she purrs, unbuttoning her bodice for Joe).

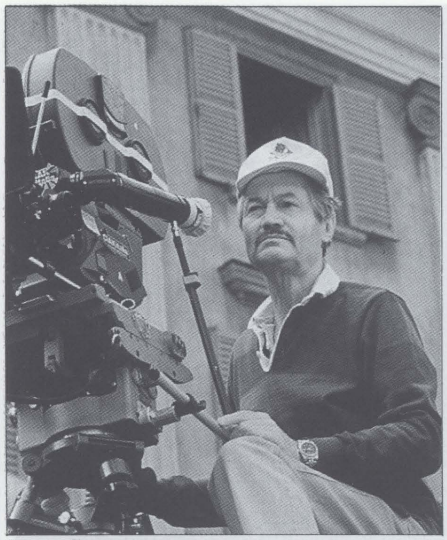
This is exploitation, though, without the dangerous edge of 50s and 60s Corman, the kind of insane inventiveness inspired by shaky sets, overnight scripts and impossible schedules. Here it has the more slickly knowing, processed quality of the New World product—Buchanan's car, with its cute female persona ('Be a good girl,' he tells it; 'My options are limited,' it replies), is a *Death Race 2000* model. The 'madness of possibility' has less resonance here because the possibilities of the film itself didn't have to be snatched out of thin air.

2. THERE ARE PARTS OF ME IN ALL OF MY FILMS. BUT WHICH PARTS?

Simultaneously with his re-emergence as a director, Corman has come out with a book, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*, an anecdotal account of his career, pegged all the time to costs and budgets; creative choices are plotted within the strictest cash limits. But what makes this more fascinating, and certainly more enjoyable to read, than most economic accounts of the industry, is the creative elan it gives off.

The money, like the props and other materials, always seems to pass directly through Corman's hands (beginning with the $12,000 he raised for his first production, *The Monster from the Ocean Floor*), to be infused with a sense of personal obsession. It is doled out as carefully, with as keen a sense of mission as any artist might measure out his inspiration. Money here really is the stuff of dreams, and Corman relates how, in mid-1987, when he felt he was becoming too bogged down in bookkeeping and accounting, he went out and drummed up another movie on the spot ('What have you got to show for shuffling papers in an office for forty years aside from a huge stack of invoices? . . . Is there tangible proof of your existence? When you make a movie, at least there is tangible proof').

Money, then, also means other things—power over life, and power over what most threatens life, time. Money translates into all kinds of illusion and time-bending: what Corman is proudest of in *Hundred Movies* is not just how



Roger Corman.

cheaply he could make films, but how he could make them look more expensive than they really were, by putting together projects on the backs of ones already in production, or borrowing what he needed from other people's films. He calculates, for example, how each movie in the Poe cycle could become more lavish-looking, by spending the same amount on new production design each time while also re-employing the sets from the previous films.

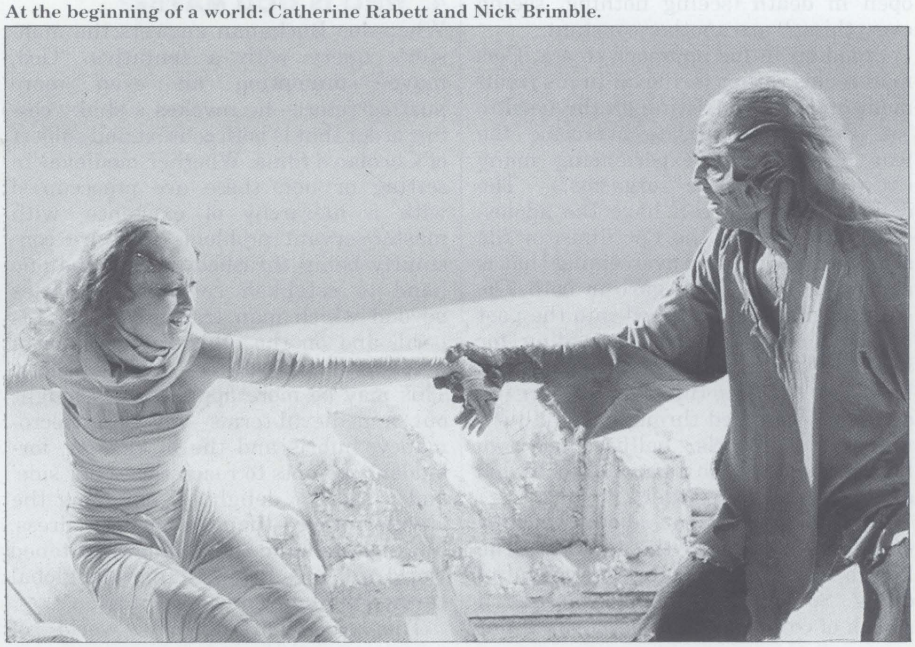
This relates to a second theme that runs alongside money matters in *Hundred Movies*: Corman's awareness of the movies as art, of his own high standing in certain critical circles, and the need to specify what makes up his 'personal style'. This he begins specifying with his first movie as director, *Five Guns West* (1955), in terms of camera movement and composition; but predominantly he insists that what sets him apart is his maverick or outsider status in Hollywood, and in the 60s specifically anti-establishment movies like *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*. This is a rather dubious opposition, certainly in terms of the Corman treatment of political or social issues; in one of the running interviews with colleagues and protégés, Joe Dante says, 'To us, Roger was an iconoclast with his left-wing posters all over the office as he counted his money.' But the 'outsider' theme has a wider significance, existentially, as a status to be both feared and embraced.

Corman remembers never being quite in the 'in' group when transplanted as a youth from Detroit to Beverly Hills. And he finds romantic surrogates for himself in his own movies: the derided little guy (Dick Miller) in *Bucket of Blood* who cons the Beatnik 'establishment'; the last of the warrior knights in *Von Richthofen and Brown*. But, having become his own establishment, the maverick who is also one of the most fiscally efficient of Hollywood filmmakers, Corman 'survives' as well as the monster in his own Frankenstein myth, a thing of rags and patches who endlessly, and as quickly as possible, replays the story of how his own world was made from the basest clay. Repetition becomes his lifeline to the beyond: 'I am with you forever. I am unbound.'

3. THERE ARE NO EYES IN THE UNCONSCIOUS

'These are a gift, to one of the greatest visionaries of the nineteenth century,' says Joe Buchanan, appeasing a truculently pistol-waving Lord Byron by offering him his powerful binoculars (which look like an old-fashioned pair of opera glasses). Later, when Joe is tossed in the lake for trying to save Justine from the scaffold, he is rescued by Mary Shelley, who has been watching the whole incident through the same glasses. 'Sight, eyes, vision—is this a theme that threads these films together or is it pure coincidence?' Corman asks about one of his most persistent yet strangely ambiguous motifs. His own explanation is again to link them to the 'outsider' theme, 'a scientist who is cursed by his vision and cast out by his community', or the lone independent following a vision that defies the

At the beginning of a world: Catherine Rabett and Nick Brimble.



Establishment ('It quickly opened *my* eyes to the way films were made within the major studio system,' he says elsewhere of his first such project, *The Secret Invasion*).

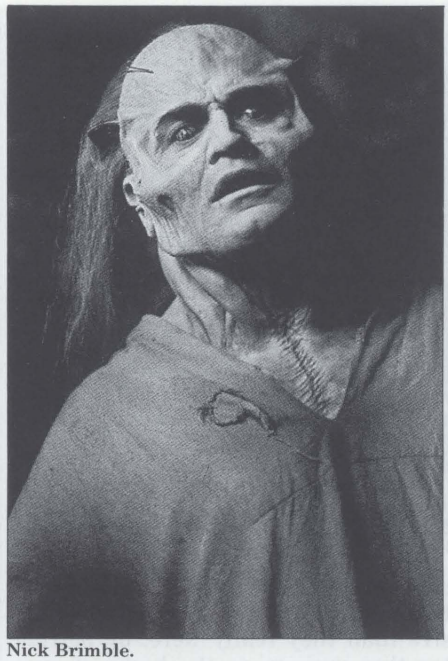
But Corman often seems to draw attention to eyes in order to *deny* the property of sight—when, for instance, they're conspicuously shielded by dark glasses. In some cases this is the protective reflex of the super-sensitive, of those who see too far or too deeply, 'in order to explore what lies beyond one's normal, limiting world'—the other-worldly visitor in *Not of This Earth*, the God-seeking Dr Xavier in *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, the other-worldly communicant Verden Fell in *The Tomb of Ligeia*. But what of Al Capone in *The St Valentine's Day Massacre*, or the bikers played by Peter Fonda and Bruce Dern in *The Wild Angels*?

Eyes that are empty chasms might be eyes that have turned wholly inward, and the result, as Corman has said of the Poe films, is projections of purely internal worlds. In these films, nothing is *seen*—'there are no eyes in the unconscious'—and their content can be treated as fantastical, as the emanation of a disturbed mind (the character's or Poe's), or as symbolic. Corman is inclined to see in them a riot of sexual symbolism: these threatening, multi-chambered houses represent the female body; the 'pit and the pendulum' are female and male symbols.

Where eyes appear in this context—and if the unconscious is not 'seen', the characters in it do a lot of seeing, as in the primal scenes witnessed by Vincent Price as a child in *Pit and the Pendulum*—they may have a direct, Freudian link with the sexual organs. Verden Fell, most neurotically protective of all Corman characters of his eyes, has them scratched out at the end by the cat that embodies his undead wife Ligeia. And if classic sexual fears are acted out through these sensitive orbs, then prominent among them is death—the other most dramatic form of self-forgetting, self-annihilation. Eyes open in death (seeing nothing, seeing everything?) are another constant.

Freudian in his approach to sex, Corman seems rather medieval in his treatment of death—insisting on the need to 'see through' death, to overcome the fear of death by experiencing many little deaths (like orgasms?). The defiance of death can have the adolescent wilfulness of the Poe films, or the sense of struggle and overcoming that is acted out in medieval garb in both *The Undead* (heroine projected into the past is persuaded to accept beheading for witchcraft so that her future selves can live) and *The Trip* (insecure advertising director is pursued through LSD hallucinations by dwarfs, hellfire and two hooded figures who turn out to be his ex-wife and current lover).

Corman's statement about *Machine Gun Kelly* points to the themes: 'The key to Kelly was that he was afraid of dying. So I built into his character a streak of cowardice and insecurity. I felt



Nick Brimble.

the picture was an intelligent psychological profile of a weak, self-loathing man who masked his fears and social and sexual inadequacy with gun-wielding bravado and acts of violence.' An 'experimental' line runs from *The Undead* through *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* and *The Trip* to *Frankenstein Unbound*, in which attempts to extend perception 'beyond one's normal limiting world', and to dissolve time (and hence end the dominion of death) run parallel. Frankenstein's monster, his cries of 'Make me a mate!' alternating with the puzzled enquiry 'Who made you?' of anyone he meets (usually before he tears them apart), is the most extreme instance of sexual and social haplessness. His eye, a makeshift, stitched-together job like the rest of him—though he is possessed of enormous strength and literal or metaphorical deathlessness—is the first part of him we see clearly, and is the single, grotesque image in the American poster for the film.

4. WHO IS GOD MAYBE?

When Joe Buchanan answers the monster's query with a tentative, 'God, maybe'—prompting an even more puzzled retort—he invokes a shaky cosmic order that is both context and subject of Corman's films. Whether medieval in setting or not, these are preoccupied with a hierarchy of existence, with master/servant problems that are constantly being thrashed out, on the one hand to establish certain boundaries beyond which man transgresses at his peril, and on the other to champion a necessary, liberating rebelliousness. This may be more appropriately fought out in medieval terms—involving necromancy, hubris and the black arts, forbidden attempts to reach the 'other side' and a sadistic delight in enforcing the 'divine' order—than in modern dress. More germane to the plague-threatened world of Prince Prospero than the global turmoil of Manfred von Richthofen's.

The nineteenth-century world of *Frankenstein Unbound* is an interesting intermediary between the two epochs, though less for the Romantic spirit of Byron and Shelley than of one of the movement's fathers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His interest in the natural world was informed, on one side, by mysticism and religion (the hubris of the Ancient Mariner) and on the other by a passionate interest in all the sciences. According to biographer Richard Holmes, Coleridge was also an early Promethean, having to be rescued when he was just able to crawl from plucking a live coal from a fire.

One of the most striking features of Corman's films is that the smaller the budget, the tighter the schedule and the more impoverished the means, the grander could be the scale on which these conflicts are fought out. *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, on which Corman says he had no money at all for special effects, is an attempt to reproduce what the universe looks like to someone who has appropriated God's powers of vision. The more intricate and detailed the film, the more this macrocosm is likely to turn into a microcosm, with the family romance taking over from the Promethean one, the struggle of sons against fathers replacing that of man against God.

The most fascinating of Corman's films in this respect—his masterpiece, in fact—is *The St Valentine's Day Massacre*, which lays out the social canvas of gangland Chicago in 1929, the class and ethnic rivalries, in terms readily translatable into a *House of Usher* family squabble of blood and doom (the 'eyes' of this film is the voice-over narrator, who expounds on the social and political context of the Prohibition wars, and knows what each man is thinking 'on the last day of his life').

Frankenstein Unbound, in a way, gives us both these dramas at once, with its brace of scientists who have set out to shake the heavens, while Victor Frankenstein in his turn finds himself shaken by a revolt from below. As a man who would be God, he leaves himself open to attack on a classic oedipal front. He fails to heed the monster's warning of what he will do if he is not provided with a mate, and the doctor's own fiancée Elizabeth (Catherine Rabett) has her chest torn apart. Nothing daunted, the doctor vows to reverse this 'gross mistake of fate', and creates a female creature from the dead girl, who is immediately claimed as the mate he needs by his first-born. In the fullness of time, of course, sons will always become fathers, and 'outsiders' will be defined not by their independence from the system they have rejected, or that has rejected them, but by their ability to go the system one better, to redeploy this antipathy as a creative force. As Joe Dante describes working with Corman: 'There was the classic father/son or counsellor/camper or mentor relationship: on the one hand, you needed to please him; on the other hand, he was a wonderful figure to rebel against.' ■

The Bridges (Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward) and daughter Carolyn (Margaret Welsh).

REFLECTING THE DECENCIES

MR AND MRS BRIDGE

The story of Mrs Bridge, loyal wife to an affluent Kansas City lawyer, dedicated mother to three slightly unruly children, was first published in 1959. Its author, Evan S. Connell, who left Kansas City behind as soon as he was old enough to become a World War II flying instructor, found that the thinly disguised account of his own upbringing had failed to achieve exorcism; he resumed the struggle, and the story of Mr Bridge appeared ten years later. Fact or fiction, the two novels circle each other warily, not quite touching on the same events, not quite explaining how the two halves of the Bridge alliance, based on an exquisite discipline, contrived to maintain their desolate equilibrium.

The second book forms a meditation on the first, provides copious additional information, but leaves the central mystery intact—much as, years later, with his exhaustive study of General Custer (*Son of the Morning Star*), Connell obsessively avoids judgment behind a vivid smokescreen of intricate evidence. It could be argued, of course, that the ardent posturing by both Custer and the Bridges is explained by simple history: they were products of their times, well aware of what their lives and allegiances signified, proud in the fatal glory of their self-sacrifice. But Connell writes too sharply, with too much regret, for his characters to rest so easily. They nag, they shock, and they are unresolved.

Growing up like Connell in a small conformist community in the 1930s, James Ivory discovered the Bridges when he was making his first feature, *The Householder*, and immediately felt that they were filmable. The intervening quarter-century before he was able to combine cast, script and opportunity seems in retrospect to have been full of rehearsals: the collision between propriety and passion is at the heart of the Bridge predicament, and has appeared habitually in Ivory's settings—whether Indian (*Heat and Dust*), American (*The Bostonians*) or Italian (*Room with a View*).

Even *Slaves of New York*, despite first appearances, was no major detour; on the contrary, its heroine, as well as sharing something of Mrs Bridge's affection for precarious headgear, is similarly afflicted with an uncompromising partner who firmly blocks her efforts to think for herself. A timely reminder that there is a less comfortable James Ivory than the elegance of *The Bostonians* or *Room with a View* might have persuaded us to expect, *Slaves* evokes the spirit of *Savages* and *The Wild Party*, earlier Ivory tales in which all kinds of suppressed indulgence came boiling to the surface. In *Mr and Mrs Bridge* (Palace) they continue to boil, and it is the manner of their suppression that gives the film its melancholy, its sympathy, and its tension.

As an essay in nostalgia, *Mr and Mrs Bridge* does all the right things. Costumes and interiors are immaculately detailed, with special attention to the party and dance sequences which, one suspects, the director of *Roseland* would dearly have liked to extend. From the brittle cocktail gatherings to the ladies' card-game afternoons to the brash wartime bars, all smoke and Glenn Miller, Ivory's decor (supervised by his *Slaves of New York* designer, David Gropman) neatly solves the problem of reconstructing a period Kansas City by rarely venturing into the open, unless for a background of timeless architecture or a screen of foliage. Much of the Bridge environment, appropriately, is provided by mirrors, reflecting the decencies by which their life is conducted.

Seeing themselves as mirrors of typical upper-middle-class behaviour, correct, proper, and even (within strict limits) unprejudiced, the Bridges are carefully caged in glass by many of Ivory's scenes, the hint taken and extended from Connell's account of Mrs Bridge's sudden distressed realisation that European hotel rooms always seem to have a mirror facing the bed. Constantly checking on her image, just as her children check on theirs in order to play fresh and possibly more rewarding roles, Mrs Bridge is even consoled at one point by a rare husbandly embrace beside a mirror. This comes after the shattering revelation that her son is unable to bring himself to kiss his mother as part of a very public Eagle Scout ceremony, a wonderful if contentious moment of ignominy straight out of the novel.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's screenplay integrates both sections of Connell's biography with practised skill and enormous but generally advantageous pruning. The European tour has been sensibly confined to Paris, lesser characters have been fused together (Gale Garnett's formidable Mabel Ong now speaks for most of them), and Mr Bridge's constant review of his shareholdings has become a single, superbly framed scene in a bank vault where Mrs Bridge has one of her inexplicable (to her husband) emotional outbreaks.

Connell's piecemeal structure, with short, ironically headed chapters, suits Ivory's gently discretionary style perfectly, and the film is a patchwork of small encounters, self-contained moments marking the secret erosion of the years. But while the best lines are Connell's, the selection is Jhabvala's to the intriguing extent that independence—rather than *inter*dependence—has become the story's main subtext: surrounding the trapped couple at its centre are a parade of characters who rail against convention (the Bridge children, the maid with her drug-running boyfriend, the desperate secretary, the suicidal friend) and who escape as best they can.

These are unmistakable voices from other Jhabvala writings like *Heat and Dust*, whose heroine finally rests demurely (anticipating Mrs Bridge) in an enclosure of glass and mysteriously elided time, or the story of Madame Sousatzka, who finds herself ensnared but defiant in a new and uncongenial age. And although with Mrs Bridge's fragile call—'Is anybody there?'—Connell devastatingly summarised her plight, it is against Ivory's more merciful rules that such a plea should go unanswered.

Where Connell abruptly killed off Mr Bridge at his dictaphone, Jhabvala and

Ivory, significantly warmer of heart, bring him home with two dozen roses (albeit in a placatory afterthought) to rescue his wife and live happily ever after. What Ivory cannot resolve, because Connell couldn't either, is the contradiction between Mr Bridge's obvious humanitarianism and his general inability to express his emotions to anyone. The clumsy scene, faithful to the book, in which he turns urgently to his wife after eyeing his daughter sunbathing on the lawn, is as unconvincing to watch as to read, and remains at odds with the genuine bewilderment with which he later greets his secretary's attempts at intimacy.

On the whole, though, the Ivory version works appealingly well. Partly this is thanks to the way he (and Tony Pierce-Roberts' roving camera) charts the recesses of wildness beneath the daily surface of the Bridge marriage, as when the two of them studiously disregard the urgent nudity of Géricault's paintings in the Louvre, or avert their gaze from some small copulatory sculptures at a party that might at any moment step beyond the bounds of good taste. And partly it is thanks to his cast that the affectionate gulf between husband and wife becomes reasonably convincing: Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman have adopted the Bridges with such charm and precision that we might be tempted to suppose that, to a startlingly plausible degree, this is their own story.

While Newman alternates chilling detachment with those sudden goofily boyish lapses that are part of his regular dramatic vocabulary, Woodward flutters expertly between easily punctured confidence and fervent absurdity (as in the futile attempt to separate her son from his moustache); together, they observe a private code which, for all we can tell, is identical to the one that has kept the world at bay throughout their professional lives. Magnificently supported by Blythe Danner as Mrs Bridge's glumly distracted closest friend, and by Robert Sean Leonard as the long-suffering son struggling to create a world of his own, they give the Bridge phenomenon a cherishable validity which, contrary to Connell (and surely far too sentimental for his taste) is both touching and reassuring.

PHILIP STRICK

NEO-CLASSIC HAMMETT

MILLER'S CROSSING

Blood Simple, the first feature of Joel Coen (writer-director) and his brother Ethan (writer-producer), was widely seen as updating the protocols of the school of writing most readily associated with James M. Cain. Now, after the high-pitched comic detour of *Raising Arizona*, the Coens have turned for inspiration to a different area of crime writing, the novels of Dashiell Hammett. This time they have adhered to the period of the originals: the milieu of *Miller's Crossing* (Fox) is an unspecified American city during Prohibition. The makers have spoken of echoing the 'dirty town' premise of *Red Harvest*, though in fact the narrative bears a more particular resemblance to *The Glass Key*.

The plot is of a complexity that would defy any brief synopsis, but turns in outline on the attempted overthrow of the city's Irish 'boss' (Albert Finney) by his Italian arch-rival—the former's Achilles heel being his infatuation with the sister (Marcia Gay Harden) of a double-dealing petty criminal (John Turturro)—and on the thwarting of this design by Finney's chief lieutenant (Gabriel Byrne), who has also been Harden's lover and who feigns desertion to the opposition in order to repair his mentor's fortunes.

The manner in which the densely packed storyline is negotiated, moreover, is not the delirious modernism of *Blood Simple*, but rather that of neo-classicism. Restraint is the keynote, whether in the preponderance of frequently near-static medium and close shots, the 'invisible' editing, or the restricted palette of Barry Sonnenfeld's cinematography, with its emphasis on browns and greys. This restraint might, to begin with, risk seeming artificial. But as the movie progresses, its scale gradually opens out and violent action intermittently intrudes, most astonishingly so in the set-piece in which the strains of 'Danny Boy' from Finney's horn gramophone majestically counterpoint his bloody turning of tables on the would-be assassins who have infiltrated his mansion retreat.

Despite such interventions, however, and the pattern of repetitions (only properly discernible at a second viewing) which underpins its structure, *Miller's Crossing* is elucidated pre-eminently through interchange between characters. In the manner of a Howard Hawks movie—though thankfully there is no suggestion of direct reference—it erects an exact yet invisible dramatic scaffolding, around which the participants, no matter how far removed from 'real' life, can create an illusion of independent existence.

Here Gabriel Byrne's hard-bitten insouciance, admirably offset by the bluffness of Finney, easily transcends anything this actor has previously done on the screen. And although it might be invidious to single out anyone else from an exactly balanced ensemble, J.E. Freeman, as the rival's granitic enforcer, contrives a figure from the realms of nightmare: asked whether he wants to kill a potential victim, he replies, 'For starters'.

Throughout, indeed, the pungently idiomatic dialogue invites quotation, whether it be Byrne's dismissal of a third party as 'not a bad guy if looks, brains and personality don't count', or a bookie's comment on Byrne's lack of gambler's luck: 'If I were a horse, I'd be down on my fetlocks praying you don't bet on me'.

Yet for all its humour, *Miller's*

***Miller's Crossing*: Albert Finney, Gabriel Byrne.**

Crossing contains a heart of darkness. The intimations of sado-masochistic emotion which insinuated themselves into *Blood Simple*, and were even perceptible (in a farcically distanced vein) in the no-hoper couple of *Raising Arizona*, here tend to hold sway. The punishment to which Byrne submits with something like complicity, in the cause of preserving Finney, becomes an expiation of his guilt at having been the older man's amorous betrayer, but also an expurgation of his feelings toward this ambiguously paternal protector. At the end, the grateful Finney's almost priest-like utterance of 'I forgive you' is met by his erstwhile protégé with, 'I didn't ask for that and I don't want it': the two men's mutual dependence is at an end. (Thematically, too, the film could be said to contain indirect echoes of Hawks.)

By this time, the explication of the intrigue behind the conspiracy, however gripping in itself, has assumed a kind of irrelevance, so that the perversity of motivation is, as it were, absorbed into the very fabric of the narrative. In consequence, *Miller's Crossing* assumes a precision of correspondence between content and form which is all too rare in the cinema today; and the resolute effacement of any authorial 'signature', such as would detract from the telling of the tale, renders the film all the more clearly the product of a (double-headed) auteur.

TIM PULLEINE

WHEN ADAM DELVED . . .

THE FOOL

Any misgivings about Christine Edzard's ability to cap *Little Dorrit* are swept aside by this still more ambitious production. *The Fool* (Hobo) has the breadth, the sweep and the moral suasion of a great nineteenth-century novel, yet it never was one. With Olivier Stockman, Edzard created it out of a slew of interviews conducted by Henry Mayhew, a contemporary of Dickens, between 1848 and 1861. Mayhew talked to a cross-section of hawkers, actors, knaves and mountebanks, and published his findings as *London Labour and the London Poor*. The screenplay preserves many of the words and sentiments that Mayhew faithfully transcribed, but they are subsumed in an entirely fresh story, wide-ranging through most strata of society and with a huge cast.

The Fool is an elaborate confection about a humble theatre clerk who stumbles upon the great irony of life that a man is taken for what he pretends to be. If he assumes the trappings of wealth and success, then trust and worldly acceptance follow. Mr Frederick (Derek Jacobi) is a con man in the true sense. Poor as a church mouse, he has passed himself off as the reclusive Sir John, and leads a double life as a friend of the poor and a crony of the rich. His easy access to both worlds enables Edzard to make a sardonic contrast between them: a life of privilege cheek by jowl with the wretched existence of the downtrodden, scratching a living from the sale of flypapers, postcards, mutton pies and opencast coal. A world so poor that if a bread roll falls in the mire, someone is sure to snatch it up for supper.

The Fool: Derek Jacobi, Paul Brooke.

The opening scene, set in the theatre, is a brilliant device for bringing these two worlds into collision. From the start we are made aware of the make-believe practised by the rich and duplicitous, and of the grinding poverty on their own doorstep like a different planet. Mr Frederick works and evolves in this theatre, above and below stage, entertaining a socialist pamphleteer (Cyril Cusack) to his time and hospitality; as Sir John, he is a welcome guest at the tables of the rich. But is he a fraud?

In a challenging scene with Ruth Mitchell, as an unnamed seamstress who acts in a sense as his conscience, Mr Frederick is forced to ask himself whether, by wearing the dress and the manners of the rich, he may not become one of them and lose touch with straight dealing. He himself believes he is studying the elite in order to exploit them and help the poor. Now he must decide whether he has been fooling himself all along. Can a man study the rich and not have some of their callousness rub off on him?

Stylistically, Edzard runs the gamut of film and recording techniques to bring out the contrast between the haves and the have-nots. Wide-angle lenses in the parlours of the rich seem to transform them into palaces, while high on the rooftops a veritable symphony of sound filters up from the street below—noise of passing traffic, the cries of street urchins and, ominous and unexplained, the echo of distant gunfire.

The Fool is constructed from a series of dramatic motifs and catchphrases. Mr Frederick's subterfuge takes place against the background of a far greater scam—that of a certain Mr Westley, who has made monkeys of the entire City, much as the South Sea Bubble scandal did a generation before. 'What a really, really dreadful man,' exclaims Paramount (Paul Brooke), the noble lord who has lent money to this entrepreneur and served on his board before smelling a rat, dissociating himself from the management, and lining up with the stockholders as a creditor.

Repeated so often, Paramount's remark becomes a motto, one of many in the film. 'Professional disappointment', 'Have you been taken in?' and 'Is the enterprise sound?' are others, recurring throughout like signposts on the road to perdition. Among other things, the film is an ironic essay on the readiness of fools to be parted from their money. It is not the Mr Westleys and the Mr Fredericks of this world who are the culprits, but human greed and rapacity.

Mr Frederick's scam follows a classic pattern. As a figure of trust but no substance, he encourages the market to subscribe to a new issue of stock in a bogus company; its notional function is

to finance deserving authors, whose right to be so favoured will be determined entirely by the board. In fact, with the proceeds of the issue, Mr Frederick corners the market in selected shares, driving the price up so that he can offload at peak, netting a cool million out of mere paper transactions. He sees it as philanthropy, a redistribution of wealth that he intends to give to the poor; but in truth it is straight fraud.

All scams are confidence tricks facilitated by a gullible public, prepared out of greed to equate 'the soundness of an enterprise' with what appears to be 'the size of its capital'. Edzard, with a degree in economics, knows her financial markets. *The Fool* could still happen, not quite but somewhat as she describes it, even today—as countless frauds from the South Sea Bubble to more recent events bear witness.

Only towards the end does the tone momentarily falter. The fantasy scene in which Mr Frederick and Sir John debate their common conscience is a rather strained conceit. And the last scene of all, in which Mr Frederick points the moral in an extended verse of poetic couplets, is not altogether happy. It leads the story into an artificial mode just when it should be most realistic. Edzard's achievement is nevertheless considerable: a clear-cut analysis of a world in which the rich keep the working class down and the poor 'have not yet spoken'. *The Fool*, in the end, is a time bomb relentlessly ticking away.

ALAN STANBROOK

THE ROAD TO MOROCCO

THE SHELTERING SKY

Nicolas Roeg was reportedly disappointed when Bernardo Bertolucci finally managed to make a screen version of Paul Bowles' novel *The Sheltering Sky*, since this was a project he had been aspiring to do for some years. This is puzzling as he had already adapted the novel—albeit obliquely and partially—back in 1978. In *Bad Timing*, arguably Roeg's masterpiece as well as his last noteworthy film, the free spirit Milena (Theresa Russell) is seen at one point somewhat improbably reading a first edition of the novel. Then she and her lover Alex (Art Garfunkel) leave for a holiday in Morocco that strikingly resembles early chapters of the book. The rest of the film could suggestively be seen as Roeg's variations on Bowles' theme of an American couple destroying each other in a doomed relationship while adrift abroad.

By curious chance, the producer of *Bad Timing* was Jeremy Thomas, who was brought in by Bertolucci to produce his own large-scale, big-budget—and in my view considerably less interesting—screen adaptation of the novel. The screenplay for *The Sheltering Sky* (Palace), written by Bertolucci with his brother-in-law Mark Peploe, is consistently faithful to Bowles' original vision of a sort of D.H. Lawrence of Arabia. Port Moresby (John Malkovich), an unsuccessful composer, and his wife Kit (Debra Winger) arrive together with a handsome young socialite, Tunner (Campbell Scott), in Tangier in 1947 in search of spiritual adventure. They think of themselves as travellers not tourists. Port is immediately unfaithful with a local prostitute, Kit with Tunner. Then they travel inland, where enticing decadence is replaced by genuine danger, squalor, poverty and disease. Conflict and tragedy separate the trio, and the book's climax focuses on Kit as she has an intense, virtually wordless affair with a nomad with whose caravan she has hitched a ride.

The Sheltering Sky: John Malkovich, Debra Winger.

Bertolucci has made few obtrusive changes. Kit is no longer a blonde but a short-haired brunette, closely resembling Paul Bowles' wife, Jane, who inspired the character. And Paul Bowles himself appears in the film as the narrator, ironically observing the characters in various Tangier bars and making sage observations on the action.

But for the most part Bertolucci follows the original to an almost undiscriminating degree. It now seems difficult to imagine that he was one of the cinema's major Marxist directors. He had the genius and arrogance not just to make major European films, but to appropriate and rework the most cherished American icons. *Once Upon a Time in the West*, whose script he worked on, was the first Western in which the protagonist turned out to be the proletariat. In *Last Tango in Paris*, he collaborated with Marlon Brando in an extraordinary attempt to dismantle one of America's most adored screen personae.

It is disconcerting to compare the subversive playfulness of the early work with the stolid spectacle of his new film. Of course the portrait of Morocco is visually striking, photographed by Bertolucci's old collaborator, Vittorio Storaro, one of the greatest cinematographers in the world. But the novel, which at least in certain episodes has dated cruelly, remains disappointingly unexamined. It followed a long tradition of works in which civilised Westerners face the horrific chaos of alien cultures. The Moroccans in the book—and in the film—are not individuals, but represent the dark, violent, unknowable side of life and sexuality.

Port's contention that the trio are not tourists now seems absurd, and one might expect Bertolucci to convey some sense of a functioning society into which the Americans uncomprehendingly blunder. But the Third World exists here, as so often before, only as a place in which Westerners learn lessons about themselves.

Bertolucci also takes over the book's more meretricious attractions, in particular a view of exotic sexuality that derives more from old Rudolph Valentino movies than a close scrutiny of nomadic customs. In *Last Tango in Paris*, anonymous sex is seen in all its facets of excitement, desperation and fear. The ludicrous affair between Kit and Belqassim (as he is in the novel; he is not named in the film) is an erotic fantasy straight out of an ignoble tradition, the white woman sexually satisfied by the potent Bedouin, lubriciously and

uncritically endorsed in Bertolucci's picturesque images. This is the Middle East as sensual playground, with Debra Winger constantly seen nude, illuminated by rays of light filtered through shutters and screens.

Bertolucci's only fully successful use of an English-speaking actor has been in *Last Tango in Paris*, where he appeared simply to have turned Marlon Brando loose. In *The Sheltering Sky*, he displays the same cloth ear for English that was so regrettable in the work of Truffaut. Two fine actors, Timothy Spall and the late Jill Bennett, are allowed to give crude, shallow reworkings of the traditional English abroad that seem to belong to another film and another era.

At 140 minutes, the film is a good half-hour too long. It is not that there is too much incident, but that sequences go on far too long and the main actors are greatly indulged. Bertolucci has always had a weakness for the operatically overstated, and the central scene of Port's fatal illness is wildly over-long, and over-acted by both Malkovich and Winger.

When Bowles' novel was first published in the late 40s, it was, rather like *Brideshead Revisited*, a tonic to wartime austerity. In its modish pessimism, there is also an excitement that Americans were able to travel again. But what is Bertolucci's film *for* in 1990? I suspect that the director was attracted because the subject is the price of sexuality. The story shows that there is no such thing as an escape, and that exoticism is a dangerous mirage. But this is hardly news. In its portrayal of the Middle East and our illusions about it, *The Sheltering Sky* is a definite step back from *Lawrence of Arabia*, and that's saying something.

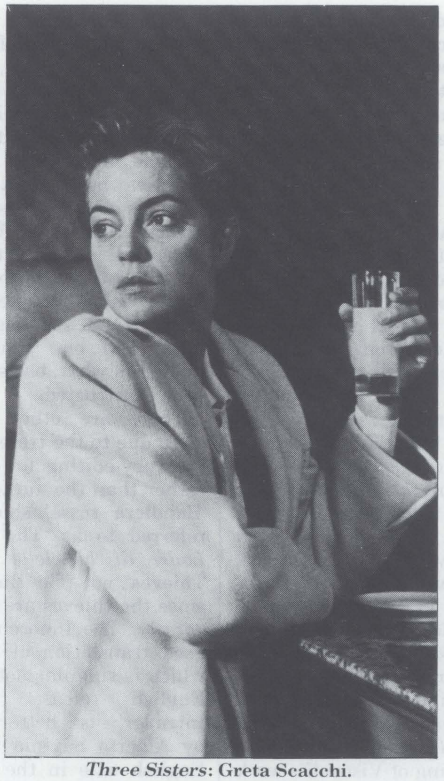
SEAN FRENCH

SEASON OF MISTS

THREE SISTERS

Throughout Margarethe von Trotta's work the political has been seen to engage, avidly and often lethally, with the personal. Where *Three Sisters* (Curzon) breaks new ground is in showing —and even seeming to endorse—the detachment of these elements from each other, concluding with little more than a rueful shrug at the disenchantments of life. On reflection, such a development isn't perhaps so unexpected. *Rosa Luxemburg*, after all, traced a course from revolutionary idealism to disillusionment and defeat.

False expectations, too, may have been aroused by the film's English title. This isn't Chekhov, any more than *West Side Story* is Shakespeare. What von Trotta has done is borrow the shape of Chekhov's play, the configurations of his characters, and pour into them her own concerns: the constrictions of the



***Three Sisters*: Greta Scacchi.**

bourgeois family, female bonding versus heterosexual ties, and (in Thomas Elsaesser's phrase) 'mutually sustaining projections and dependencies intertwined like daisy chains'.

Chekhov's provincial garrison town has become the university city of Pavia, and repeatedly von Trotta's camera tracks the eldest sister, Velia (Fanny Ardant), as she strides through quiet quadrangles past ancient grey statues. This is literally a cloistered existence, from which the hubbub of political activism has withdrawn. ('Nowadays the university's almost too quiet,' sighs one academic, recalling the exciting days when a colleague could be gunned down by a student at the door of his own classroom.) We hear of one of Velia's students, imprisoned for 'underground activities', but he remains a shadowy, off-screen presence.

Politics, insofar as they figure, are greenly benign. Sandra, the youngest sister (Valeria Golino), sprays TREES RULE on walls and, like Anna in von Trotta's earlier *Sisters*, worries about where science is heading. 'Are your discoveries so deadly because of fear of death?' she asks Massimo, an astrophysicist at the university. 'Or fear of life,' he replies gloomily.

Massimo, played by Peter Simonischek with something of the hangdog charm of Jeremy Irons, occupies the emotional focus of the action: loved by Velia, he abandons her for her sister, the discontentedly married Maria (Greta Scacchi), only to return eventually to his neglected wife. Linking his destructiveness in personal relationships with that of his science, the film constantly opposes the cold absolutes of physics to the vulnerable transience of human sentiments. 'There can be certainties in physics,' Massimo observes, 'but not in love.'

It's on the emotional plane that *Three Sisters* works most effectively, with von Trotta frequently finding the ideal visual correlative for key moments in her characters' inner lives. Much of the film is shot amid the melancholy flatlands of the Po valley, where poplars loom dankly through the mist and it seems to be autumn all year round. At one point, visiting an old deserted farmhouse, Velia finds herself alone on the topmost floor; gazing through a tiny low window, she sees, but is wholly unable to influence, the exact moment at which Massimo transfers his affections from her to Maria.

The other destroyer is Sabrina (Agnes Soral), a rapacious vulgarian who marries Roberto, the susceptible brother (Sergio Castellitto), and systematically crushes his musical talent. She makes her entrance at a dinner party, erupting in brash electric blue into a roomful of restrained browns and greys. Later, we find Roberto at the bank where Sabrina has induced him to work, despondently explaining investment policy to a client. The camera quietly pulls back from him, as though discreetly withdrawing from a display of private grief.

Where the film comes unstuck is in trying to move into areas of positive action or open conflict. The scene where Velia, Sandra and Massimo's wife Erika dance together in a deserted café feels uncomfortably willed, a conscious demonstration of female solidarity rather than a natural development out of situation or character. Two bitter family quarrels are clumsily dropped in, unprepared and undermotivated, and a fatal car crash is inserted, it seems, merely to ensure each sister has a lost love to mourn in the closing tableau.

This final scene encapsulates, even to excess, the elegiac mood that pervades the film. Earlier we've seen a family friend, the old doctor, watching black-and-white home movies of the sisters' dead mother, whom he loved (and who is also played by Scacchi), accompanying the young Roberto on the piano. 'We only exist when we're loved,' he muses. Now, with all the family assembled, Scacchi again plays, the camera closes in and colour drains away, leaving her smiling in monochrome. Maria, it appears, has become her own mother, trapped in a remembered past, existing only in an old man's memories.

Coming from an avowedly feminist director, it seems an oddly passive conclusion. Massimo, speculating on the remote future, speaks of the stars turning into 'permanently immobile blocks of ice'. For all its sensitivity, *Three Sisters* prompts the fear that von Trotta's cinema may be heading along the same track.

PHILIP KEMP

SECONDARY REVISION

LUCHINO VISCONTI
The Flames of Passion

by Laurence Schifano
Collins/£17.50

Luchino Visconti came from an old and distinguished aristocratic family. Ancestors of his had been Dukes of Milan in the fourteenth century. His branch of the family was also exceedingly rich, his father having prudently married a granddaughter of Carlo Erba, the pharmaceuticals magnate. Although the family fortunes underwent various vicissitudes, he remained a rich man to the end of his life, with a retinue of servants and elegantly furnished properties in Rome, Milan and elsewhere.

But this rich and lordly dynast was also a Communist. His first film-making experience was as assistant to Jean Renoir during the Popular Front in the late 30s. He went on to make his own film, *Óssessione* (1942) with mainly Communist collaborators, and then played an active role in the anti-Fascist resistance. A Marxist vision of history pervades most of his postwar films, from *La terra trema* (1947) to *The Damned* (1969). Although his later work is not conspicuously political, he retained his attachment to Marxism and to Communism throughout his life.

He never in fact joined the Communist Party. At a time when the party in Italy was strategically signing up as many bourgeois intellectuals as possible, it nevertheless drew the line at attempting to recruit someone so obviously connected to the aristocratic *beau monde*, and a homosexual to boot. For homosexuality was viewed almost as disapprovingly by the party as by the Church (witness the almost parallel case of Pasolini), and Visconti's homosexuality, although not flaunted, was certainly no secret in the circles in which he moved.

It is unlikely that Visconti wasted much sleep over ordinary forms of social disapproval of his conduct. But all the evidence suggests that he was deeply tormented by his inability to live a 'normal' life. Italian disapproval of homosexuality has little to do with sex and everything to do with the offence it brings to the sense of family. For someone whose sense of family is dynastic, as Visconti's was, the burden is intensified: not only was he cut off from ordinary familial relations in the present, but his failure to produce issue marked him, tragically, as the end of his line.

Interpretations of Visconti's work based on the contradiction between his aristocratic background and his adopted Communism and Marxism have been commonplace for many years. But the more anguished contradiction between his dynastic sense and his homosexuality has come to be remarked on only recently. It surfaces most clearly in the films he made towards the end of his life, but it is really only since his death in 1976 that enough of the biographical elements have come to light 'to make such an interpretation possible. It is, with hindsight, a central issue not only in *Ludwig* (1973), where the young king's failure to marry and produce issue is a major reason for his deposition, but also, even more painfully, in *Conversation Piece* (1974), where the solitary professor suffers a heart attack after the death of the young man (played by Helmut Berger) whom he loved and had adopted.

Now the knowledge that the director Visconti was, or had been, in love with the actor Berger is not necessary to an understanding of the film *Conversation Piece*; indeed it is probably a distraction. But for an understanding of Visconti's work as a whole, in terms of the artistic personality which produced it, it is not irrelevant. As the biographical data become known, so they combine to form a picture of an artist whose multifarious work—in theatre and opera as well as in cinema—is internally motivated in surprising but consistent ways. From outside the work seems riven with inconsistency and arbitrariness; biography restores a sense of unity and purpose, and of a struggle to make contradictory impulses consistently productive.

Laurence Schifano's biography won the Académie Française prize for biography in 1988. It has now been translated (more or less satisfactorily) into English, making it the third biography of the artist by a woman author to appear in Britain in the past twelve years. It is also by far the best. It deals brilliantly with his background, intelligently with his politics, and sympathetically with his love life. But above all it is an artistic biography. It brings biographical facts to bear on artistic choices. Sometimes it seems to go too far in weaving elements of presumed early experience into some of Visconti's more whimsical choices. Although it is not, mercifully, a psychobiography, it tends to present Visconti's work as a relentless process of what Freud called 'secondary revision', a reworking of hidden psychic material in artistically acceptable form. It is also prone to idealisation—both of Visconti himself and of the social and artistic world he belonged to.

A more irritating fault is that it has no references to any sources. Statements are quoted with no indication of when they were made, to whom, or whether they have appeared in print before. My impression is that most of the material in the book is reliable and that few undue liberties have been taken, at least as regards Visconti's film career. But some bits of the narrative, such as the account of Visconti's relationship with Maria Callas and her then husband, G. B. Meneghini, ring false, and one would like to know on what basis they have been constructed.

There are other irritations, often due to the translation or to the copy-editing (or lack of it), rather than the author: the song 'Bandiera rossa' should not be referred to as 'The Red Flag'; *Ladri di biciclette* is 'Bicycle Thieves', not 'The Bicycle Thief', since the thieves are plural; conversely 'The Innocents' is not a good translation of *L'innocente*, which is singular not plural (the English release title 'The Intruder' is better); a book by Alberto Savinio is given an English title in the text and a French one in the bibliography but no Italian title anywhere; and so on. The book also deserves a better subtitle than 'Flames of Passion'. The book's great strength is that it succeeds in recounting a life lived in terms of *mise en scène*. There's no catchy title there, merely a reason why Visconti deserves to be remembered.

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

SMOKER TO LIVING ROOM

HARD CORE
Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'

by Linda Williams
Pandora/£20

In the United States, women now account for roughly forty per cent of all rentals of hardcore videos. Long considered the province of furtive men in raincoats, pornography has entered the American mass market, gaining a vast new audience. The changes which made that move possible form the focus of Linda Williams' fascinating study.

The idea that pornography changes may in itself seem startling: feminists, in particular, have tended to condemn it as an unaltering expression of sexual hatred. Yet like all cultural products, pornography responds to cultural upheaval. It has changed as sexuality has changed, as the feminist movement has forced film-makers and viewers to rethink old notions of sexual politics.

Williams is at her best in analysing the key transformation in pornography's history: the decline of the illegal, one-reel stag films which dominated American hardcore for over half a century. Flourishing from the 1910s through the 60s, stags genuinely fit the feminist stereotype. Little more than showcases for female bodies aimed at all-male audiences in brothels and 'smokers', they were technically primitive and virtually plotless, spotlighting compliant young women for whom even rape was an untroubled pleasure.

The 70s brought a dramatic change. Following a series of Supreme Court decisions, porn could now be exhibited legally in new chains of adult film theatres. What emerged looked very much like mainstream cinema: feature-length 'porno', marked by coherent storylines, polished production values, and its own fleet of stars. The biggest difference, however, was that stags had shown sex as a trouble-free and fundamentally male pleasure. In porno, it became a problem—for women in particular—with narratives centred on the complexity of sex in a feminist era.

The ground-breaker in this regard was *Deep Throat*. That infamous tale of a misplaced clitoris might not seem a model of sexual enlightenment. But in fact it displayed a sharply new focus: a woman's difficulty in finding satisfaction. By tracing her experience of sexual frustration, it implicitly acknowledged a major feminist question: how women can learn their own sexual needs and begin to negotiate pleasure with partners.

Since the release of *Deep Throat* in 1972, the bulk of film hardcore has followed its lead, highlighting women's problems and difficulties. In itself, this has hardly been an egalitarian triumph: porno may have raised new questions, but its answers have often been sniggering and puerile. If the problem is 'bad sex', the solution is 'better sex'—'better' in the eye of the male voyeur, at whom such films were generally aimed. Even this is beginning to change. With the advent of the video revolution, pornography abandoned the sleazy adult theatre to enter the familiar terrain of the home. That opened the way for a vastly expanded female audience.

In consequence, much American video pornography now targets the women's and couples' market. To some degree this involves cosmetic changes (stronger stories, better actors, fewer pimples on bottoms), but in at least some cases the changes are more profound: the smirking tone dropped, sincere attempts made to explore the complex nature of women's desire and pleasure. The most fundamental 'revision' has come with women

film-makers, among them former porn star Candida Royalle, whose Femme Productions gears its sexual fantasies to a woman's (and a feminist's) point of view.

Williams' book provides a much-needed analysis of a contentious and too often misrepresented subject. But prospective readers should be warned: this is definitely a scholarly study, drawing on psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist theory. Laden with densely worded analyses of 'the gaze', 'the phallus' and 'fetishisation', it often resorts to a barrage of jargon that may well discourage even the most intrepid.

It's well worth persisting, however: Williams' argument is far too illuminating to be left to film theorists alone. British feminists are currently accelerating their campaign to outlaw pornography as an affront to female freedom. Williams' survey differs in suggesting that porn has been offensive not because it is explicit, but because it has for too long excluded female viewpoints and voices, only now beginning to be heard. Rather than muted through censorship, perhaps those voices should be allowed to flourish, encouraging more imaginative fantasies and better pornographers.

MARYBETH HAMILTON

HISTORICAL POETICS

MAKING MEANING
Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema

by David Bordwell
Harvard University Press/£23.50

Given that American university film studies is now an institution big with numbers and self-satisfaction, and that David Bordwell is one of the big figures in it, *Making Meaning* is a startling and important book. It is in essence a criticism of the practice of film criticism, and particularly of its academic variety. It seems to have been inspired by two things.

The first was his revulsion at the flood of more or less worthless interpretation of films now pouring out of American university departments of film studies. As someone who has probably sat on more editorial boards and grant-giving committees than anyone else in the film studies business, Bordwell must have been subjected to the full force of this flood during the last two decades, and it gradually became clear to him that it was too easy to produce acceptable film interpretations or 'readings'.

The other factor was an analysis of the nature of critical interpretation, plus a critique of French-derived film theory and the critical interpretations based on it, which was carried through on both logical and factual grounds in a book of mine well-known to Bordwell, though he does not mention it here.

In Bordwell's magnificently expanded treatment of the subject, he separates out two main classes of interpretative approaches in film criticism, the explicatory and the symptomatic, and in the process of explaining them, intertwines his exposition with a brief history of film criticism since World War Two.

Explicatory criticism rests upon the belief that the aim of critical activity is to ascribe implicit meanings to films. It has always been a major part of the more highbrow end of journalistic criticism, and takes off along the path set by literary criticism as it developed earlier in this century. An example is the young Andrew Sarris describing *Citizen Kane*'s stylistic exhibitionism as a reflection of Kane's personality.

Symptomatic criticism derives its initial thrust from the central notion of psychoanalysis, that the patient, or in this case the film, shows by certain features, which can only be recognised by the initiated, that there are deeper meanings underneath the obvious ones. The presence of these deeper meanings is supposed to be indicated by internally contradictory features of the film, or by allegedly 'missing' features. Bordwell goes on to illustrate how this kind of approach has been transferred to interpretations using other subsequent systems of ideas, such as structuralism, Marxism and feminism.

Bordwell follows with a description of the ways meanings can always be superimposed on films by applying opposed pairs of verbal concepts in an analysis, or oppositions within oppositions, or by using hierarchies of terms. With a wealth of examples, he shows how the meanings read out of films are not in general logically justified, and indeed that the arguments used by interpreters are usually logically faulty.

I particularly admire his identification of one of the common pseudo-logical (and false) arguments used in criticism, which he illustrates with a reference to David Thomson: '*Lola Montès* shows audiences watching performers. *Lola Montès* is about audiences watching performers. Cinema involves audiences watching performers. *Lola Montès* is about cinema.' Bordwell identifies the limited number of other standard techniques, such as the personification of the camera and the 'punning' move —hallways and alleyways are symbols of passage, and so on.

In a clever series of demonstrations, Bordwell also shows how the same feature of a film is interpreted in opposing ways, as with the cut between two characters that a critic claims simultaneously conveys an opposition and a likeness, and how this kind of procedure is used by exponents of every kind of interpretation: traditional, Marxist, Lacanian and Feminist, right through the lot. Particularly illuminating is his comparison of seven interpretations of *Psycho* dating from 1960 to 1986, in which critics of every stripe interpret major features of the film in opposite ways: the audience is supposed to sympathise with the heroine by one, be distanced from her by another. Etc.

Despite this, Bordwell sends the comforting message to his academic audience that criticism is a worthwhile craft like land-surveying, or wine-making or parlour magic. This is unfortunately untrue, for land-surveying and wine-making are useful to most people, whereas academic criticism is only useful to its practitioners. However, academic criticism *is* a bit like parlour magic, though less entertaining.

Nobody's perfect; Bordwell's presentation of the vital facts of his case is surrounded by a matrix of unnecessary terminology derived from recent unproven speculations of cognitive psychology, and the last chapter, 'Why Not to Read a Film', is rather self-serving. It proposes a rational control on interpretation through the use of film history knowledge, including knowledge of how a film has been put together, which is not exactly a new idea, since I introduced it into film studies long ago, and have been working it for over a decade.

He proposes that his own 'Neoformalist film theory' can deal with film history, but in this he is mistaken, for Neoformalism, like the original Russian Formalist criticism of which it is a slight variant, is by its nature anti-historical, having no intrinsic conception of historical causality, and it also depends on the theorist's own speculations as to how all art is constructed and received by audiences.

The way Bordwell presents his ideas at this point, now labelling them 'Historical Poetics', suggests an attempt to grab the theoretical baton and march at the head of the parade of the new wave of film history, which got under way without him in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the average academic film interpreter should read this book and tremble.

BARRY SALT

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LETTERS

Film & TV drama

SIR,—Yet another attempt to illuminate the difference between film and television drama leaves me in the dark. David Russell (SIGHT AND SOUND, Summer 1990) refers to symbolism and iconic images, to the definition of television as the medium of speech (radio with pictures!); and when he contrasts television's Newtonian time-space (*sic*) with cinema's Proustian (no, *not* Einsteinian) ability to bend time, or stretch it, or something, he manages to fill the darkness with fog.

But the fog does not conceal some tired old references to big and small screens and the assumption that these sizes somehow explain differences in viewing experience. Mr Russell forgets that, in the great days of popular cinema, the screen, from the back of the circle, looked small, whereas many modern television screens (especially if you are close enough) are relatively large. As Kinsey found, in quite a different experience, size is less important than a smooth blend of movement and sound.

A film or a television play is an attempt to stir the imagination through the eye and the ear. The 'language' (one might even call it the 'music') of the experience lies in the choice of rhythm with which shot follows shot; in the ideal counterpoint between image and sound; and in the selection of occasional moments of stillness by which the director allows the viewer to contemplate a landscape or a human face. When television was in its infancy, film cameras were already flexible enough to master this language—and the contrast between even mediocre films and early television plays was marked. But now, when television frequently uses film cameras and when its own equipment (particularly editing equipment) is as nimble as that of film, it is no longer necessary to assume any inherent inferiority in television drama.

David Russell does have a tiny, if vulnerable, point in his reference to distracting domestic surroundings in normal television viewing. But presumably he has never been part of a provincial Saturday night audience in the 40s—with constant to-ing and fro-ing, frequent demands for crisps and ice-cream, sporadic chattering and mating calls. Clearly such conditions are undesirable for any viewing (and more easily avoided in one's home), but, like the size of screen, they have little to do with the *potential* for good drama in an ideal marriage of sight and sound.

Yours faithfully,
FREDERICK AICKEN
Hatfield, Herts

Co-productions

SIR,—I am not surprised at the repeated attacks on the latest European film productions in articles such as William Fisher's 'Let Them Eat Europudding' rationale (SIGHT AND SOUND, Autumn 1990). It has been one of the most inspiring subjects of writing for quite a while in this country . . .

European co-productions are by no means a new (or even post-1945) phenomenon. Attempts by producers and distributors to extend their influence beyond their national boundaries date back to the beginning of the century. Despite the intense hostility between individual European nations after World War I, the 20s were a period of extraordinary activity by, among others, British, French and German film companies to establish European film concerns in order to combat the economic and cultural dominance of Hollywood on the world market. For a variety of reasons, all these attempts collapsed around 1930.

They were revived in the late 40s and in the 50s and subsequently nurtured within the context of the development of the European Community. Originally regarded as the main line of defence against American influence, the idea of European co-productions is recently coming under attack again by the very people it is supposed to help: the film-makers themselves, who are afraid that films produced for a European (rather than a French, German, British) audience will lead to a loss of national identity.

Many 'masterpieces' and 'classics' of European Cinema are co-productions, whether made, like Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, before European film treaties ever existed, or made under an official agreement, like Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*, a Franco-Italian co-production. If co-operation between Italy and France has been particularly successful since the 1945 agreement, there is no doubt that collaboration between Britain and other European countries does not seem as fruitful as co-production between other members of the EC and countries in the Council of Europe. Nevertheless—to cite only two extreme examples for British film-makers—it has given Conny Templeman a chance to make her first feature film (*Nanou* in 1985) and Peter Greenaway an opportunity to make a new film almost every year (*The Belly of an Architect*, an Italian co-production, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, a French one, made with Dutch financing).

If the system has its faults, it cannot be dismissed as incapable

LETTERS

of 'improving Cinema' (what and who does?), and one ought to recognise that, at its worst, it does help Cinema to survive, and at its best, it can produce masterpieces.

Yours faithfully,
ANNE JÄCKEL
Senior Lecturer
Bristol Polytechnic

Michael Balcon

SIR,—I'm assembling material for a biography of Sir Michael Balcon, and would very much like to hear from anyone who knew or worked with him, or who has letters, documents or other material relating to him.

Yours faithfully,
PHILIP KEMP
c/o Methuen Drama
Michelin House
81 Fulham Road
London SW3 6RB

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CAROLE ANGIER is the author of *Jean Rhys*, a critical biography; currently engaged on an *Omnibus* programme on Edgar Reitz for the BBC . . . JOHN POSTGATE is Emeritus Professor of Microbiology at the University of Sussex; preparing a biography of his father, Raymond Postgate . . . STEVE VINEBERG writes regularly on film for *The Boston Phoenix* and *The Threepenny Review* . . . LEONID ALEKSEYCHUK is a filmmaker, critic and theorist, working mainly in Canada and Italy since being blacklisted in the USSR . . . PETER BRUNETTE is the author of *Roberto Rossellini*, and co-author of *Screen/Play: Derrida and Theory* . . . CAROLINE DUNANT, a freelance researcher and writer, holds a degree in Art History and Film Studies.

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MEDUSA PICTURES for *Society.*
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■ AVALON
(Columbia)
Barry Levinson's chronicle of his extended family and their complicated relationships from the 40s through to the 60s. Armin Mueller-Stahl holds centre screen as the grandfather, always harping on the magic of his arrival from the old country; and the film is by turns amusing and melancholy. Apparently aimless, as Mueller-Stahl's son becomes a successful department store entrepreneur and is gradually estranged from his less dynamic brothers, the movie comes together in its emotionally gruelling latter stretches. Self-indulgent and fussily detailed, *Avalon* may not match the spark of Levinson's hand-carved 'smaller' films, *Diner* and *Tin Men*, but it's more agreeable than his machine-tooled super-successful 'product' pictures. (Aidan Quinn, Elizabeth Perkins.)

■ DR M
(Hobo)
Television screens and video hoardings discreetly waft a siren song of escape from it all; a wave of inexplicable suicides breeds fear and suspicion on both sides of the Berlin Wall; and the author of this new Black Death, mysterious media magnate Dr M (a drearily miscast Alan Bates) gloats at his computer consoles. These early scenes in Chabrol's tribute to Fritz Lang are worthy of Mabuse himself, not least the stroke of genius that has his lair fronted by a bomb-site ruin mutated into an acid rock disco, its tight-packed, black-clad, zombie-stomping patrons fully justifying its designation as 'Extinction'. Latterly, though, the grip slackens, with the plot drifting into a silly echo of *Westworld*, and the good guys evading M's clutches with absurd ease. (Jennifer Beals, Jan Niklas.)

■ THE MAHABHARATA
(Virgin)
Cinema audiences will only be seeing two-hours-fifty-minutes worth of Peter Brook's adaptation of the fourth-century Indian saga about gods begetting the world and the unholy struggle that ensues between two families of our earliest ancestors. This much brevity might seem a blessing, but Brook's film may be one of the greatest testaments to the power of storytelling, to the way we make our world through the stories we tell. A truncated version may be less compulsive, and therefore seem 'longer', than the nearly six-hour TV version. Be that as it may, Brook's ample material—a Creation myth to swallow the Bible, a dynastic squabble to swallow everything on TV—and minimal means (the film is a record of his original stage production) deliver a message to end them all.

■ METROPOLITAN
(Mainline)
Set 'not so long ago' among the UHB ('urban haute bourgeoisie') of New York, this follows a red-haired radical in a rented tuxedo who semi-accidentally gets invited to a debutante party, and afterwards finds himself thrown into the company of the 'Sally Fowler Rat Pack', a group of pleasant, neurotic, rich young things who get together after formal balls and stay up all night doing nothing in particular. With a merely notional plot, it is mainly concerned with character and discussion, never descending to the easy route of presenting its people as total morons or parasites. Thanks to a clutch of perfect performances and a top-flight script, it's an unalloyed joy, full of quotable lines and with a fantasy tinged vision of a not-quite-real New York Christmastime. (Carolyn Farina, Edward Clements, Christopher Eigeman; director, Whit Stillman.)

□ AFTER DARK, MY SWEET
(Virgin)
Another great 133-page Jim Thompson novel gets dragged out to annoyingly respectable length in this well-acted, well-directed, well-scripted, marvellously atmospheric picture which still manages to crawl to its grim conclusion with none of the pulp urgency required by the material. Rachel Ward and Jason Patric do their best-ever work as the non-fatale femme and battered boxer mixed up in a kidnap scheme. (Director, James Foley.)

□ THE BIG PICTURE
(Hobo)
A Hollywood skit, with a *Spinal Tap*-ish mix of perception and satire, about a film student who goes into 'development hell' as his art movie project is mangled into a teen beach picture. A film of many small pleasures, from the satirical swipes at student films to the recognisable movie biz monster characters. (Kevin Bacon, Emily Longstreth, Jennifer Jason Leigh; director, Christopher Guest.)

□ CATCHFIRE
(Vestron)
Extensively re-edited by Vestron, this has been signed 'Allen Smithee' by director Dennis Hopper, who features as an eccentric hit man despatched by mobsters to rub out witness Jodie Foster, with whom he enters into a *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* relationship on the road. Although it bears the scars of a troubled production, it's still enjoyable. (Charley Sheen, Joe Pesci, Bob Dylan.)

□ CYRANO DE BERGERAC
(Artificial Eye)
Director Jean-Paul Rappeneau scoops on the sentiment in this swooning full-dress adaptation, gleamingly photographed by Pierre Lhomme. Memorable set-pieces, including a dynamic curtain-raiser in the theatre, and Gérard Depardieu gives his all, and more, but overall a bit like an overdose of profiteroles. (Anne Brochet, Vincent Perez.)

□ HENRY & JUNE
(UIP)
The Moderns are stirring again, with Stravinsky and Satie on the soundtrack, and Henry Miller (Fred Ward) and Anaïs Nin (Maria De Medeiros) producing literature that will outrage the moralists of the day. Philip Kaufman's bio-pic is both teasingly insubstantial—shadows, smoke and characters drawing from, robbing, and turning into each other—and self-defeatingly conventional. (Uma Thurman.)

□ THE HOT SPOT
(Rank)
Dennis Hopper relocates Charles Williams' 50s novel *Hell Hath No Fury* to contemporary Texas, and despite the title and erotic fevers generated by Don Johnson and Virginia Madsen—a made-in-hell match of sullen drifter and small-town schemer—is rather cool in tone. Hopper spends his time languorously establishing mood, character and sun-struck Edward Hopper settings, and delivers both a classic *film noir* and one laid open for amused inspection. (Jennifer Connelly, Charles Martin Smith.)

□ HIDDEN AGENDA
(Enterprise)
Ken Loach's political melodrama starts with a vivid illustration of shoot-to-kill policy in operation in Ulster. But the narrative device of a Stalker-type investigation subsequently tends to rely on crudely retailed explanations to prop up its 'dirty tricks' scenario. The final effect is rather sub-Costa-Gavras. (Frances McDormand, Brian Cox, Brad Dourif.)

□ I HIRED A CONTRACT KILLER
(Electric/Contemporary)
Jean-Pierre Léaud as a clerk sacked from Her Majesty's Waterworks who fails at suicide, hires a professional killer to make a proper job of it, then changes his mind. Shot by Aki Kaurismäki in largely derelict London locations; funny, idiosyncratic, laconic, and in the end rather an affecting statement on survival. (Margi Clarke, Kenneth Colley.)

□ MIAMI BLUES
(Rank)
Charles Willeford's seamy novel is turned into a *nouveau noir* gem, with Alec Baldwin as a compulsive con-man impersonating a police officer and dragging dumb-but-decent hooker Jennifer Jason Leigh into his half-baked schemes, while real cop Fred Ward pursues, intent on getting back his false teeth. Funny, violent and flavourful. (Director, George Armitage.)

□ MIRACLE MILE
(Hemdale)
Warned in the night by a wrong-number call (hoax, nightmare or the truth?) that disaster will strike Los Angeles by dawn, Anthony Edwards has 70 minutes to find his girl and get out. Steve DeJarnatt's disconcerting suspense thriller, part comedy, part nuclear polemic, combines wonderfully weird twilight-zone characters with surrealistic outbursts of violence, revealed in images that suggest Edward Hopper restyled by Francis Bacon. Modest, but unusually absorbing. (Mare Winningham, John Agar.)

□ NARROW MARGIN
(Guild)
This remake of Richard Fleischer's mean streak of a 1952 B movie has an infallible premise—Gene Hackman and Anne Archer stuck on a train with killers who want them dead—but dissipates it in its flashy struggle through the story. Hackman on top form, though, as the desk-jockey lawyer nudged into becoming an action man. (Director, Peter Hyams.)

□ THE NASTY GIRL
(Mainline)
A witty, horrifyingly relevant piece about a girl who becomes interested in the history of her hometown during the Third Reich, and as she grows up, encounters more and more resistance to her stirring-it-up researches. Presented like an essay, with Lena Stolze narrating and commenting, it doesn't belabour the horrors but does discreetly and unpopularly point the finger of guilt. (Director, Michael Verhoeven.)

□ THESE FOOLISH THINGS
(Gala/Curzon)
Alias Bertrand Tavernier's *Daddy Nostalgie*, in which Daddy (Dirk Bogarde) is dying, Mother glumly broods, and nostalgia drives Daughter (Jane Birkin) to dream of an idyllic family past that never was. A bitter-sweet chamber piece, buttressed by lush Mediterranean landscapes, aching with sincerity but overdoing the pregnant pause/soulful look to the point of tedium. (Odette Laure.)

□ TILAÏ
(Artificial Eye)
Spare, almost Racinian tragedy from Burkina Faso in which tribal laws close in on two young lovers whose offence is a peculiarly African definition of incest. The ritual, repetitive gestures and stylised use of landscape are as hypnotic as a litany, though ethnic purists may object that the law (tilaï) in question is an invention of director Idrissa Ouedraogo.

□ THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH
(Electric/Contemporary)
Quirkily mannered debut feature. Young mechanic returns home after prison term for murder, causes speculation about his possible innocence, and begins uneasy relationship with local girl who is convinced the world will shortly end. Beautiful photography, with Godardian use of bold colours, but the script is over-ambitious and the performances generally wooden. (Adrienne Shelly, Robert Burke; director, Hal Hartley.)

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